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**DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK** *news & obits* • **BOOK ZONE** *books*  
**NICK LOWE'S MUTANT POPCORN** + **TONY LEE'S LASER FODDER** *films*



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# INTERFACE

## FICTION



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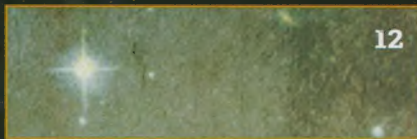
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## Lifetime Subscriptions

We've often been asked if we'll reintroduce the option of a lifetime subscription to *Interzone*, and some current *Interzone* lifers have asked about the possibility for sister magazine *Black Static*. So we make the lifetime subscription available again now, on exactly the same terms as before: the amount you pay is equivalent to ten years' subscription at the current rate, and a lifetime is defined as "one which lasts either the lifetime of the subscriber or the lifetime of the magazine". This applies to both *Interzone* and *Black Static*, and there is also an option to take out a slightly cheaper joint lifetime subscription to both.

These lifetime subscriptions have now been added to the order form in the centre of the magazine, and to the online shop (ttapress.com/shop). It goes without saying that such long term subscriptions are of great benefit and support to the magazine, so many thanks in advance to those of you who take up the offer.

Meanwhile, over the last few years there have been constant rises in the costs of paper, printing, postage, and everything else, while the price of the magazine has remained static. We will, however, be increasing the cover price and cost of basic 6-issue and 12-issue subscriptions in 2012. We haven't decided on the exact price rise yet and we'll keep it as small as we possibly can, but by all means renew early to avoid it! If you're not sure when your current subscription expires, the number next to your name on the mailing label refers to the final issue. (UK subscribers can ignore the letter next to the number, that's just an area code to help us sort the magazines for the mail.)

Courtesy of Matt Stephens (Fingerpress, publisher of Dominic Green's *Smallworld*), here's the intrepid Roy Gray (right) flogging TTA stuff at the Manchester Independent Book Market, with contributors Tim Lees and Alison Littlewood, clutching a bottle of champagne...



# ANSIBLE LINK DAVID LANGFORD



**We Are Respectable.** The British Library 'Out of This World' sf exhibition, guest-curated by Andy Sawyer and with an official Book of the Show by Mike Ashley, has been well reviewed and runs until 25 September at the London St Pancras branch: don't miss. A 19 May preview party was densely packed with the usual suspects swilling free wine, most unexpectedly Charles Chilton of BBC Radio *Journey into Space* fame – still going strong at 93 (now 94). Whippersnappers like Brian Aldiss (85) were suitably awed. I remain overcome by the discovery that the Cataclysm and Doom display cases include a rare copy of that ultimate disaster novel or novelistic disaster, my and John Grant's *Earthdoom!* Why won't my mother believe this?

**Novel Awards.** Carnegie Medal (children's): Patrick Ness, *Monsters of Men*. • Compton Crook (first genre novel): James Knapp, *State of Decay*. • David Gemmell Legend (heroic fantasy): Brandon Sanderson, *The Way of Kings*; newcomer Darius Hinks, *Warrior Priest*. • Locus: Connie Willis, *Blackout* and *All Clear* – one long novel in two volumes; fantasy China Miéville, *Kraken*; first novel N.K. Jemisin, *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*. • Nebula: Connie Willis, *Blackout* and *All*

*Clear*. • Stoker (horror): Peter Straub, *A Dark Matter*.

**As Others See Us.** Interviewing the actor playing Merlin in *Camelot* (Channel 4), journalist Benji Wilson deftly sums up the entire history of Arthurian legend: 'When did epic fantasy switch from being the nerdy stuff that the Dungeons & Dragons kids played at break time to something that is currently asking for consideration as serious television?' (*Telegraph*)

**Queen's Birthday Honours.** Bernard Cribbins, actor whose genre roles include *The Mouse on the Moon* (1963), *Daleks Invasion Earth: 2150 AD* (1966), *The Wombles* (1973–1975 as narrator) and recent *Doctor Who* episodes, received an OBE. So did Tim Brooke-Taylor and Graeme Garden, whose best-known sf parts were in *The Goodies* and bits of *I'm Sorry, I'll Read That Again*. Who could forget 'Professor Prune and the Electric Time-Trousers'?

**Alternate Prehistory.** Anne Robinson: 'The road known as Watling Street, which now incorporates part of the A5, was built by which ancient civilisation?' Contestant: 'Apes.' (*The Weakest Link*, BBC1)

**Shock Horror Outrage.** The most complained-about films of 2010 were *The Lovely Bones* and *Kick-Ass*, reports the British Board of Film Classification. Protesters felt these should have been rated higher than the BBFC's 12A and 15. (BBC) The horror sequel *The Human Centipede II* was refused any BBFC certificate owing to excessive ickiness and 'a real risk of harm to viewers', who are perhaps in danger of being stitched together by the easily influenced.

**Gary Shteyngart** won the Wodehouse prize for comic fiction with *Super Sad True Love Story*, set in 'a dystopian, near-future America' and described by a judge as 'great literature' and 'wild comedy' but not of course anything sordid like sf. (*Guardian*)

**As Others See Us II.** Readers and watchers of *A Game of Thrones* are a gloomy lot: 'Even when we consider the realm of fantasy at large, including J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Wizard of Oz*, C.S. Lewis and George Lucas, there's a heavy dose of dourness in the mix. As expansive as fantasy and sci-fi can be, spewing forth know-it-all translation droids and winged monkeys and gigantic worms, it all seems



to end in the same predictably doomed battles between factions – armies from the north, east, south, and west, clashing into the night.’ (*New York Times Magazine*)

**Dr. Rowan Williams**, Archbishop of Canterbury, reminisced in his Easter sermon: ‘Some of you might just remember an episode of *Doctor Who* a couple of decades ago called “The Happiness Patrol” where the Doctor arrives on a planet in which unhappiness is a capital crime, and blues musicians lead a dangerous underground existence.’ Could he be angling for a guest part in the series, where his distinctive beard and costume would play very well?

**Philip K. Dick**, as a trivia answer, was the last straw that got the setter of a May *Canberra Times* quiz fired. The problem wasn’t that final question about who wrote *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, but the overall theme. Each innocuous answer (‘What is the official currency of Vietnam?’) was also slang for the, ahem, pork sword or one-eyed trouser snake. Australians, poor dears, are easily shocked. (*The Register*)

**Matthew Graham**, co-creator of *Life On Mars* and *Ashes To Ashes* and writer of the *Who* episode ‘The Rebel Flesh’, is less than enthusiastic about his audience, or at least one age-group: ‘*Doctor Who* fans can be very fascistic. But I don’t really take them seriously. I don’t write it for 45-year-old men.’ (*Total TV Guide*)

**Thog’s Masterclass.** *True Romance Dept.* ‘You mean the babe? Wow! Isn’t she built like a force-field latrine, though?’ (Isaac Asimov, *The End of Eternity*, 1955) • *Dept of Introductions.* ‘I am Ayla of the Ninth Cave of the Zeladonii, acolyte of the Zeladonii, First Among Those Who Serve The Great Earth Mother, mated to Jondalar, Master Flint-Knapper and brother of Joharran, leader of the Ninth Cave of the Zeladonii. I was Daughter of the Mammoth Hearth of the Lion Camp of the Mamutoi, Chosen to be the spirit of the Cave Lion, Protected by the Cave Bear, and friend of the horses Whinney, Racer, and Gray, and the four-legged hunter, Wolf.’ (Jean M. Auel, *The Land of Painted Caves*, 2011) • *Psychogeography Dept.* ‘Well, I grew up in Bangor, Maine, that is. I know there’s one in England, too.’ ‘Yes, I think I would have detected a Welsh accent.’ (Lev Grossman, *Codex*, 2004)

## R.I.P.



▲ **James Arness** (1923–2011), US actor best known for Westerns but forever remembered by sf fans as *The Thing from Another World* (1951), died on 3 June aged 88. Other sf credits are *Two Lost Worlds* (1951) and *Them!* (1954).

**Doug Chaffee** (1926–2011), US sf and space artist who worked with NASA and many games franchises including *BattleTech* and *Magic: The Gathering*, died on 26 April; he was 75.

**John Glasby** (1928–2011), UK author who was hugely prolific in many genres in the 1950s and 1960s – including much sf and supernatural fiction for Badger Books and Curtis Warren under his own name, various house names and as A.J. Merak – died on 5 June; he was 82. More recently he had returned to fiction with ghost stories, plus novels including contributions to the late John Russell Fearn’s sf ‘Golden Amazon’ sequence.

**Martin H. Greenberg** (1941–2011), leading US anthologist who edited and co-edited well over a thousand anthologies in all genres – the *SF Encyclopedia* currently lists 575 of sf, fantasy and horror relevance – died on 27 June at the age of 70.

**Terry Jeeves** (1922–2011), long-time UK fan artist, writer and publisher, died on 29 May; he was 88. His solo fanzine *Erg* saw 166 issues 1959–2005; he also co-edited *Triode* 1954–1977; his line artwork appeared in countless fanzines

and won him the 2007 Rotsler Award; a founder member of the British SF Association, he edited its critical journal *Vector* 1958–1959; he was inducted into the First Fandom Hall of Fame in 2010.



▲ **Jeff Jones** (1944–2011, latterly Jeffrey Catherine Jones following a 1998 sex change), major US fantasy, sf and comics artist often compared with Frazetta – who once praised Jones as ‘the greatest living painter’ – died on 19 May aged 67. Jones won the 1986 World Fantasy Award for best artist.

**Joel Rosenberg** (1954–2011), Canadian-born author of several popular sf and fantasy series including ‘Guardians of the Flame’ (1983–2003), died unexpectedly on 2 June; he was 57.

**Alan Ryan** (1943–2011), US horror writer whose first novel was *Panther!* (1981) and who had begun to publish again after over 20 years’ silence, died on 3 June; he was 68. His 1984 story ‘The Bones Wizard’ tied for a World Fantasy Award.

**Mark Shepherd**, US author whose novel debut was *Wheels of Fire* (1992) with Mercedes Lackey, and who wrote and co-wrote other novels in her fantasy series, shot himself on 24 May.







# Insha'Allah

MATTHEW COOK

**S**onic booms split the emerald sky. From the baked clay courtyard, the fighters are nothing more than pale, silvery wedges, streaking between the clouds trailing lines of white vapor. The women clustered around the well turn their veiled faces up, eyes searching the heavens.

As they watch, a tongue of light flickers out, vivid, glowing blue, flashing between two of the craft. One fighter explodes, blossoming into flames in an eyeblink. After a few heartbeats, the rumble of the ship's death reaches their ears.

Shaomi sits beside the well and watches the electric green sky, shading her eyes from the midday sun. Around her, women gossip and pray for deliverance and protection. Children chase chickens and *gipko* lizards through the dust. Four years ago, when the E'k attacks first began, and the Concordance sent ships to fight them, such an aerial display would have transfixed them. Now, they barely look up from their playing, as each rumble marks the death of another inhuman enemy. Or another defender.

"I wonder if the pilot made it out," the woman beside Shaomi says.

"*Insha'Allah*," Shaomi replies. *If God wills it.*

"*Insha'Allah*," the woman agrees. She nods and hefts her bucket, then walks off, sandals raising puffs of dust with every step.

Shaomi screws the cap onto the water wagon and turns for home. There's much work to do today, so much work. She wishes that she could delay her chores until later, when the heat isn't as bad, but the law is very clear on what must be done. There are so many that need her. She cannot afford to wait.

Outside of her house, in the yard, the families of the dead sit beside their loved ones, the living consoling each other in hushed tones. The dead lie at their feet, their motionless forms covered in clean sheets, relatives huddled around them in the spare shade of the fig trees, waiting their turn. The mourners embrace, taking, and giving, what solace they can.

A man next to the wall raises his voice in a keening wail, his tear-stained face twisted. The bundle at his feet is small, child-sized.



The old woman beside him pats his hands. “Shhhhh. The deceased suffer when we wail too loudly,” she gently reminds him. “Do not send her on to paradise with the sound of your grief ringing in her ears.”

There are so many bodies in the yard. So many girls, and women. So many families beside them, eyes red from weeping, the pale dust on their cheeks cut by the tracks of tears.

Shaomi empties the water wagon into the cistern at the side of the house, then heads inside. It's cool, out of the relentless sun. She walks out to the covered back patio, where the simple tools of her current trade are arrayed around the washing table.

Her assistant, Ghayda, sits on the floor, surrounded by stacks of folded, white sheets. Shaomi is pleased to see that she is already gloved. With scissors, Ghayda cuts the cloth into the shapes they will need for the *al-ghusul*, the symbolic washing, and for the five burial garments that make up the female *kafan*.

The sheets bear the stamp of a hotel that once stood in Bismaq, over 100 kilometers away. Now it, like most of that once-fair city, is nothing more than rubble. Ghayda cuts the machine stitching and the hotel stamp off the sheets; they will use the scraps with decoration on them as rags for the washing, then discard them. The *kafan* must be pristine and unadorned, so says the law.

“She's ready,” Ghayda says, inclining her head towards the shrouded form on the table.

“A dozen more are out in the yard. Let's get started.”

Shaomi pulls down the drape, exposing the client's face and breasts, folding it so that everything below the navel and above the knee remains covered. The client is old, her breasts leathery, deflated bags, her neck a system of dark folds and canyons.

Mottled purple marks stain the skin of her belly. Shaomi traces the marks with her fingertips, and frowns. The old woman's one remaining eye, a dusty, whitish marble, stares at the ceiling, into the unseen light of heaven. Death came swiftly for this one, God be praised, a crushing blow to the side of the head. Falling rubble, perhaps.

The washing table is a narrow wooden plank, resting on squat legs. One end is slightly elevated, raising the client's head above the rest of her body. Shaomi checks Ghayda's work with a glance, assuring herself that the rolled-up cotton plugs are in place in the woman's ears and nose.

Satisfied, Shaomi pulls on opaque latex gloves, then takes a cloth from the pile beside the body. She wraps it around her hand, and dips it in the water trough alongside the patio wall.

“*Bismil-lah*,” Shaomi intones. It is as it always has been, immutable and never-changing. As her mother taught her. As her grandmother taught her mother; a ritual stretching back to the holy sands of old Earth itself.

Shaomi cleans the dust and dirt from the client's skin with long, gentle strokes, then presses down on her belly, hard, forcing the filth from her body. Ghayda sluices what comes out away with ladles-full of water, washing it towards the drain in the center of the floor. When the cloth grows dirty, she drops it into a bucket, replacing it with a fresh one. She will bury the rags later, out in the clean, desert sand.

Shaomi takes a third rag and reaches under the shroud, then wipes the old woman's private parts. Ghayda reaches under the covering, her hands moving. When she is done, Shaomi checks

her work with her fingertips. The cotton plugs are in place. She nods and smiles approval.

Shaomi performs the *wudu*, gently bathing the old woman's face, her hands and arms, her feet and ankles. Then she begins again, washing the old woman with soap and water, starting with the client's right side, then moving on to her left.

While Shaomi washes, Ghayda combs the old woman's hair, then shampoos it with the harsh gel that they get from the relief drop-pods. The wash water is perfumed, as it must be, but the camphor is overwhelmed by the shampoo's chemical stink.

*Insha'Allah*. They do the best they can. Soon they are done, the old woman's hair braided, her body dried and clothed in her burial *kafan*. She nods approval: when Ghayda started, just four months ago, the process took much, much longer. Shaomi finishes the consecration, daubing tiny spots of precious camphor on the old woman's forehead, nose, hands, knees and feet; everywhere that touches the ground in prayer.

“So sad,” Ghayda says, stroking the old woman's hair. “She is...she *was* someone's grandmother. She baked *naan* and sweet rolls for her grandchildren, just like mine did.” Ghayda's fingers trace the edges of the crushing blow that wiped away the old woman's life.

Shaomi sighs. “God is merciful,” she says. “The...accident... probably spared her from a worse fate.”

She lifts the edge of the burial tunic, exposing the purplish marks she saw before. “See there, that rash?” Ghayda looks, and nods.

“It is called thrombotic thrombocytopenic purpura,” Shaomi says. “In old people, such marks are almost always an indication of lymphoma or blood cancer. Both are very painful, and cause great pain before the release of death. At least this way, she didn't suffer.”

Ghayda looks at Shaomi, her eyes wide. “You can tell so much just from looking at a mark on her skin?”

Shaomi shrugs. “I was not always a washer woman. Come, we are almost finished.”

Shaomi folds the old woman's hands on her breast, right over left, and holds them while Ghayda wraps the body with the outer shroud, finally securing the cloth with rope. She can feel Ghayda watching her from out of the corners of her eyes as they work. She tells herself to not worry: Ghayda is a good girl, a clever girl, impressed by her apparent wisdom, not offended or outraged by her knowledge as some would be.

When they are done, Shaomi rises and walks out to the courtyard, back into the glare of the midday sun. She nods to the old woman's family. They step inside and lift the white bundle.

A relative, certainly not her husband for he is too young, a grandson perhaps, places coins in Shaomi's hands. She nods thanks, and places the money in a box beside the back door. She calls for the next client.

Again and again, through the long, hot afternoon, Shaomi and Ghayda perform the *al-ghusul*. All their clients are women, as the law demands. Only women can wash women; only men can prepare men. The coin box fills with silver, and gold, and the occasional piece of Concordance scrip. Shaomi looks inside, at the treasure trove within, and smiles a twisted smile.

All those who know the *al-ghusul* are wealthy now. All good Muslims must be buried within three days, and people like her,



once a luxury, are now a necessity. The dead are too abundant for their families to perform the act in the time the law requires.

*Why has God chosen to make me rich?* she asks herself, as she does almost every day. *Why does He reward the preparation of death, rather than the protection of life, as it used to be?*

The thought shames her, as it always does, and she shakes her head at her arrogance. *Insha'Allah*. Only God knows. It is not her place to second-guess.

Still...

After all have been washed, Shaomi and Ghayda cleanse themselves, and pray. They sit together for a late supper. Ghayda is seventeen, an orphan like so many others. Her uncle knows she must sometimes work late. He approves of her new vocation, so very honorable and proper for an unmarried young woman.

Ghayda prepares the food while Shaomi stares up at the cloudless night sky. Lights chase themselves back and forth across the stellar firmament, each one a craft of unimaginable power and speed.

Glowing streaks dash between them sometimes, weapons of light and destruction. Every now and again the lights explode, some silently, some with a rumble like distant thunder.

They eat, and Shaomi sends Ghayda home. "Run along, now," she says. Ghayda hugs her and walks into the night. Tomorrow will doubtless bring a fresh crop of clients.

*Insha'Allah*.

Shaomi leaves the dishes and crawls into bed. She strokes the place where her husband once slept, staring at the sheet with dry eyes. She listens to the distant thunder until sleep carries her away.

**They bring the** pilot in the morning, borne at the head of a procession. She hears them before she sees them, a mass of raised voices coming closer. She walks out into the front yard. Already, half a dozen draped bodies lie in the morning sunshine.

As the procession approaches, Shaomi sees that the pilot is a woman. The gray, clinging suit she wears is built to withstand the rigors of flight, not for modesty.

Someone has covered the woman's face with a scrap of cloth, tucking it across the front of her cracked helmet. Blood stains the gray fabric.

They lower the pilot to the ground and Shaomi hurries forward, pulling aside the improvised veil. Her face is a mass of cuts and bruises, her eyes swollen to slits. Shaomi bends and listens to her breathing, frowning at the bubbling whistle.

She looks up at the surrounding faces. She sees no hostility in their eyes, no black turbans. Her body relaxes, just a bit.

"Take her inside. Quickly."

They lift the wounded woman and carry her into the cool darkness. Shaomi directs them to place the pilot in her own bed, then shepherds them from the house.

"What are you doing?" Ghayda hisses in her ear. "She is an infidel."

"She fights against the E'k. She pilots one of the fireflies that light up the night sky."

Ghayda looks at the door, her eyes filled with worry. "This isn't the city, Shaomi. Women are forbidden to practice a man's

art. If the mullahs find out..."

Shaomi shakes her head, her fingers probing at the pilot's neck. There are implants set into her flesh, plugs of silvery metal. She can feel the wires running beneath the other woman's skin.

It is a technology beyond anything she learned about in school. Back when women were allowed to go to school, that is. Back before the most conservative of the mullahs used the people's fear of the E'k to grow their own power. Before Shaomi had to trade her modest skirts and silk blouses for the *hijab* she now wears. Before the Sharia replaced the older, gentler interpretation of God's laws that they had lived under since their ancestors had come to this green-skied world.

The woman's skin under Shaomi's hands is warm, and alive. It reminds her of nights in the hospital. Her hands were wise once, so very wise, fingertips reading clues invisible to her eyes. Things hidden beneath the surface.

The ragged edge of a broken bone. The hot tightness of subdermal bleeding. She remembers these things; time has not dulled her knowledge, praise be to God.

Shaomi feels around the base of the pilot's skull, fingertips carefully cataloging the shapes of her vertebrae. She feels no obvious breaks or tell-tale swellings. She loosens the woman's helmet, then tugs it gently from her head.

It takes her a moment to figure out the magnetic fasteners on the pilot's flight suit. She opens them and exposes the pilot's chest, frowning at the deep purple and black mottling. Her fingers trace the crooked lines of her ribs.

The other woman is broken inside, in many places. Shaomi sighs and closes her eyes.

She knows from her old life, from the time before the E'k, that the pilot's fighter craft travels through the atmosphere at many times the speed of sound. When it was shot down, when she ejected, God only knows what crushing force was applied to her slender frame.

Shaomi looks around her one-room house and frowns. She points to the chair, standing on a small rug in the corner. "Ghayda, look under there and bring me what's underneath."

Her assistant frowns, but obeys, returning a moment later with a battered metal box. Inside is Shaomi's cache of medicines – antibiotics, mainly. Some pain killers.

It's not much. The pilot needs a proper MRI scan. She needs 4D imaging and a trained surgeon. She needs IV antibiotics and nano therapy. Bone staples and blood analogue. All Shaomi has is clean water and cloth, and a few bottles of black market penicillin.

And faith. *Insha'Allah*. Only God knows if the pilot will live or die, but no matter what, Shaomi will try.

"What about the clients waiting in the courtyard?" Ghayda asks.

Shaomi looks up from her patient. "Do the best you can. You can do most of the *al-ghusul* alone. You know the words, and what to do. Call me when you need help, and I will come."

Ghayda nods, scowling, and walks out onto the covered patio. Shaomi watches her perform the washing and the shrouding, most of her attention focused on cleaning her patient's wounds. When the younger woman calls, she helps her, as best she can.

When night falls, there are still mourners in the yard. Shaomi



walks out and apologizes for her slowness, begging then for forgiveness. Everyone waiting knows the reason for the delay, but nobody, thank God, seems angry or upset. She promises them that she will begin again just after morning prayers. The families nod and carry off their beloved dead.

Inside, the pilot lies in Shaomi's bed, motionless, but still alive. Her breathing has eased, thanks to the length of plastic hose Shaomi has stitched into her chest. It drains into a pan on the floor. Ghayda looks at the arrangement, her eyes wide.

"Will she die?" she asks.

"*Insh...*probably," Shaomi says. "She's bleeding inside. If we could get her to the hospital in Marquaat, they could maybe fix whatever is torn. But she'd never survive the trip. It's a miracle that she's still alive as it is."

"What do you need me to do?" Ghayda asks.

Shaomi looks at her young assistant, sees the fear, and blossoming courage, there. It warms her, like morning sunshine on her face, and she smiles.

"Nothing. It is in God's hands now."

The pilot is very pale, her skin nearly translucent. Her hair is white as fresh milk, thin as spidersilk. Shaomi knows from checking her pupil reaction that her eyes are pale gray, the color of water in a shallow metal bowl.

Ghayda nods and traces the patient's cheek with a fingertip. "So delicate," she marvels. "So smooth."

"Whatever suns she grew up beneath were very different than ours," Shaomi agrees.

"Do you...?" Ghayda begins, then she stops. She stares at the floor, frowning with nervousness.

"What?"

"You lived in the city once," Ghayda finally says.

"Yes."

"You were educated. You worked. You had a career."

Shaomi nods. "Yes."

"You were..." *Married*, Shaomi thinks. "You had a family. You had a husband."

Shaomi sighs. "Yes, I did. He died. On the night the E'k first attacked. He was a policeman. He was killed while trying to help people out of a burning house."

"Did you have a child?"

"We... God chose to bless others with children, but not us. I used to be thankful, actually, since I would have had to quit my job. That used to make me feel guilty, but now, with everything that has happened, I think it is for the best. *Insha'Allah*."

"Why did you leave the city? You might still be allowed to do medicine there, from what I've heard."

Shaomi shakes her head. "My husband's parents and sister lived here. This is...this was their house. I came to tell them their son's fate, but when I got here, I learned that they were already dead. An E'k bomb fell on the market."

Shaomi sighs again. The tears that have been threatening since she thought about her husband sting her eyes. "My mother was a washerwoman, so I knew the rites. I performed the *al-ghusul* for his mother and sister, even though they had been dead for longer than three days. I couldn't just leave them. The villagers were still hiding in the hills, so I buried them in the cemetery. No one else was here to do it. Someone must have seen that I knew the washing rites, because the next morning,

there were clients waiting in the yard. That was four years ago, and I've been here ever since."

"You could go back to the city," Ghayda says, her voice barely a whisper. "You could take me with you. I'm a good assistant. I'm too stupid to learn medicine, but I can clean. I can comfort the sick. I can pray for them, when they are too sick to pray for themselves."

Shaomi smiles. "You're not stupid, Ghayda. But this is my home now. God has decided that this is where He wants me to be." She looks at the bruised face of the sleeping pilot. "He brought me here for a reason."

Together, they watch the pilot in the light of a single candle, sitting vigil through the long, dark hours.

**The pilot remains** unconscious all through the second day. Shaomi empties the blood from the pan into the drain, and forces a few sips of tepid water past her cracked lips. She checks her pulse and the sound of her breathing.

When it is clear that hovering over her will do no good, she walks out into the yard. She spies one of the men who brought the pilot to her, Yusiif, a rug maker's apprentice.

Yusiif knows of her skills as a healer; his mother would have died last winter if not for the medicine hidden under Shaomi's floor. She beckons him over.

"Do you know where they found her?" she asks him.

"Yes. About seven miles to the west, beside the dry riverbed."

"Go there with some of your friends and bring me whatever else is there. She should have been in..." She struggles with how to explain it. "She should have been in a metal chair. Like a throne. It may have wires, and machines, strapped to it. Bring them all here."

"But...why?" he asks.

"There may be medicine in the chair that can save her. And her people have ways of tracking it."

Yusiif nods, then runs off. Other young men follow in his wake. Shaomi goes back inside.

She and Ghayda perform the *al-ghusul*, working silently, save when the law requires them to speak words of prayer. Shaomi keeps an eye on the still form. She checks on her between clients, giving her more water.

By late afternoon the yard is empty, praise Allah for His mercy. Yusiif and his friends return with the pilot's chair, or what's left of it. People have been at it with wrenches; it's stripped down to the frame. The first aid kit bolted beneath the seat has been plundered.

"I'm sorry, but this is how we found it," Yusiif says.

Shaomi nods and asks them to put it out back, beside the covered patio. Just in case.

When they have finished with the last of the clients, Shaomi asks Ghayda to bury the unclean rags out in the dunes on her way home. She doesn't want to leave the pilot alone for too long.

"Of course," her assistant says. "But you really should get out. Go for a walk. You've been inside for two days."

"I will," Shaomi lies. "Go. Be with your family."

When she is alone, Shaomi sits at the pilot's side, watching the slow rise and fall of her chest. She traces the implants in her skull with her fingertip, wondering what they help her see.



She makes a simple meal of *naan*, sprinkled with a little *qu-root*. She sits on a rug beside the bed, and wolfs down the bread and cheese, her eyes never far from the sleeping form. When she is done, she gives the pilot an injection, measuring out the antibiotics carefully.

Only three more shots left, then the penicillin will be all gone. She wonders if she can find more. Sometimes black marketers will sell to her, although she is a woman, if the price is right. *Insha'Allah*.

The pilot's breathing seems better than yesterday. The chest tube no longer seeps blood. Shaomi decides this is a good sign, and surrenders herself to sleep.

**The pilot wakes** at midday on the third day, just after the *duhur*. Shaomi looks up from the midday prayer, and sees her pale eyes are open. Watching her.

Her language is unknown to Shaomi, a string of harsh gutturals, mixed with lisping sounds, like a hissing kettle. Shaomi kneels at her side and bathes her face with a cool cloth.

"You are on the mend," Shaomi says, not sure if the words are a lie, hoping they are not. "Rest, and regain your strength."

The pilot eats a few mouthfuls of broth, and a little *naan*, softened in the warm liquid, before she flops back, exhausted. She feels at her side, where the tube protrudes from between her ribs, and asks something.

"Your lung was collapsed, but the tube released the pressure. Also your ribs are broken. You need a surgeon. When will your people come to get you?" Shaomi asks.

She seems to understand; maybe it is the word *surgeon*. She points up towards the sky, sweeping her arm from east to west. Her pale eyebrows raise in a question.

"You have been here three days," Shaomi answers, holding up her fingers. The pilot nods, and frowns. Soon she is asleep once more.

Shaomi helps Ghayda with the clients, looking in on the pilot when she is able. She gives her another injection. Only two left. She wonders when she can get away long enough to make contact with the black marketers for more medicine.

She looks into the coin box, and a monstrous frustration fills her heart. The box is almost full. Even after Ghayda's wages and the bribes the mullahs demand for allowing her to live alone, there's more than enough to purchase more medicine. She feels tempted to curse the restrictions placed on her, but she recoils from the thought. It's not God's fault. Is it?

"Shaomi," the pilot says, her voice a whisper but the word perfectly clear. "Shaomi, can you come here?"

Shaomi looks at Ghayda and the younger woman's eyes go wide. Neither of them knew that the pilot spoke Pashto.

She rises, and walks to the pilot's side. "You know our language," she says.

The other woman gestures feebly to one of the silvery plugs set in her temple. "I have a... machine in my head. It... translates for me. I'm sorry if I don't... speak the words very well."

She speaks the truth. Her pronunciation is atrocious, but Shaomi can understand her well enough. "Why did you not just say so?"

"Needed...time...for the machine to figure out...your language. It should have...found it instantly. I fear it...I fear I may

be damaged."

"What is your name?"

"Captain...Ilyana Petrarch. Concordance Navy. Second... Aerospace Lancers."

"You're safe here, Captain, but you must rest."

"My ship..."

Shaomi shakes her head. "They found you in a...ejection seat," she says, hunting back in her memory for the unfamiliar word.

"Then they should be looking for me, but...it may take time. The F'k..."

She stares up, towards the dusty ceiling, her pale gray eyes widening with fear.

"Shhhh..." Shaomi whispers, dabbing her cheeks with a damp cloth.

"Nothing we know of...can endure the gees their craft can produce," the pilot says. "I tried to get away...but once one got behind me..."

She plucks at the thin covers, as if she means to rise. Shaomi smooths her hands across her chest.

"Rest. Your people will be here soon, and then you can go home."

The pilot struggles for a moment, but she's weaker than a child, and Shaomi easily overmasters her. "Hospital," she whispers.

Shaomi shakes her head. "The nearest town is a four hour journey by truck, and all they have is a clinic. The nearest hospital is in Marquaar, more than a day away. You would never survive the trip, and even if you could, you should not be out where the black turbans can see you. It's not safe."

Bright tears stand out in the corners of the pilot's eyes. "My people...are up there. Fighting...fighting for you."

Shaomi nods. "And mine are down here. All we can do is have faith in God that He will see our efforts and find them worthy of His aid. *Insha'Allah*."

The pilot drifts back to sleep. Shaomi and Ghayda wash the dead and wrap them in winding sheets. Slowly, the yard clears of the waiting dead.

Just before evening prayers, Yusiif knocks on the outer door. Shaomi peers out at him, careful to not open the door wide enough for him to see the dead woman naked on the patio.

"Black turbans," he says. "Headed this way."

Shaomi's breath dies in her chest. "Quickly," she begs. "Drag the pilot's chair into the olive grove next to the neighbor's house. Don't let them see it."

Yusiif nods and sprints off, waving to some of his friends. Shaomi looks around the single, small room. There is no place to hide the pilot.

She walks to her side and slaps her face lightly. "Captain. Captain!" After a moment, the pilot's eyes flutter open. Outside, she can hear the approach of an engine, one of the ground trucks the black turbans ride around in.

"Listen to me," Shaomi says, urgently. "You must lie very still. Still as a dead woman, do you understand? If they find you here..."

"We...we are your allies in this fight," the pilot gasps.

"That does not matter to them!" Shaomi hisses. "All they'll care about is the fact that you're a woman, heretical in your



ignorance of the Prophet's laws. At best, they will take you to Marquaah, so the mullahs can review your case."

"Do they have...a hospital there?"

"Yes, but as I said, Marquaah is a day away by truck, over bumpy roads. The journey would kill you. And there's no guarantee that they would even take you. You are an infidel, unclean. Less than human in their eyes."

The pilot nods. "I will...trust you...to do the right thing."

Shaomi and Ghayda arrange the pilot's limbs, so that she resembles a dead woman. They pull a sheet over her, one of the bloodstained shrouds that another dead woman was brought in. Shaomi pulls the end of the chest tube from the bucket and tucks it under the sheet.

Out in the yard, she hears the truck stop in a spray of gravel. Men's voices call out. She hears them, walking up to the house.

"Stay still as death, I beg you," Shaomi whispers, before striding to the door. She pulls her veil across her face, then opens the door, surprising him with his fist upraised.

"You cannot be here!" she calls out. "There are dead women inside! God's own law says that they cannot be seen by you!"

The black turban peers to look past her. She knows him: Ali, son of Akbar the carpenter, who, when the mullahs cried out for *jihaad*, gave up his father's trade to become a warrior of God. Even before taking up the black turban, Ali was known for his gluttony, and his cruelty to women. They are vices the black turbans seem ignorant of, or which they ignore.

"We're told that an outworlder was brought here," Ali says. "A woman pilot."

Shaomi shakes her head. "Whoever told you that was lying. I've been busy performing the *al-ghusul* for the dead all day. There are no outworld women here."

Ali frowns, then shakes his head. "I will see for myself." He moves to push past her.

"No! No! You cannot enter! There are women inside!" Out in the yard, the families of the dead shift and mutter at this violation of the law, but the other black turbans on the truck brandish their carbines, and no one so much as moves.

"Ghayda! Cover the client!" she screams as Ali shoves her aside. He opens the door, and strides inside, Shaomi trailing behind.

He pauses just inside the threshold. Out on the patio, Ghayda pulls a shroud over the client, barely covering her in time. The pilot lies on the bed, motionless, beneath the bloodied sheet.

"Who were they?" Ali asks, looking around the room, his eyes flickering on the shrouded forms.

"A mother and daughter, from Anwur to the north," she says, remembering a bit of gossip overheard the other day at the well. "A sky ship fell on their house. It sprayed liquid fire as it died, incinerating everyone inside."

Ali reaches for the edge of the sheet covering the pilot. "No!" Shaomi says, stepping in front of him. "She is indecent under there. To have you see her in this way would be against the law. Do not shame her and her family like this!"

"We interpret God's law, woman, don't forget that," he says, but his hand pauses.

"But she is so badly burnt," Shaomi says, remembering the horrible story the women told beside the well. "When they brought them in, their arms were wrapped so tightly around

each other. When we tried to separate them for the *al-ghusul*, their flesh fell away like cooked lamb off the bone..."

Ali freezes. "Burnt?" he asks. Like all Muslims, he shares the special terror of death by fire, absolutely forbidden under God's law.

Shaomi kneels and picks up the coin box. She puts the heavy shape into his hands.

"Here," she says, soothingly. "I was needing to take this to the mullahs tomorrow, but I suppose that, since I know your family so well, I can trust you to deliver it. Will you help me, Ali?"

Ali hefts the weight of the coins, then smiles. "I suppose it's my duty to help such a devout and Godly woman."

Shaomi nearly sags with relief. "Thank you. Now, if you will excuse us, we must say our prayers."

Ali looks around the single room a final time. Ghayda sits beside the client on the patio, shaking with fear. Ali smiles at her, and winks. "Another time then. *Assalamu alaikum*." *Peace be to you*.

"*Wa alaikum assalam wa rahmatu Allah*," Shaomi replies, almost choking on the words. *And to you be peace together with God's mercy*.

He walks out, rejoining his men at the truck. If he's bothered by the impropriety of his time alone inside, he does not show it. He climbs inside and they drive off in a cloud of dust.

When they have gone, Shaomi pulls the sheet from the pilot's face. Her eyes are wide, but steady.

"Well done, Captain," Shaomi says. "Now let's get you some more water, and then we really must attend to our prayers."

**Shaomi wakes to** the sound of thunder. She walks out into the cool night air and looks up. Overhead, a battle rages, constellations of light darting through the vast bowl of night.

She watches for a while, as ship after ship explodes into flame. One falls, just over the horizon, screaming like a woman in pain as it descends, the tip of a spear of fire. She prays that nobody is beneath it when it lands.

A sound reaches her ears, a papery rustle. She turns and walks inside.

On the bed, the pilot gasps for air. Shaomi lights the candle on the nightstand, and frowns when she sees the other woman's face.

Her lips are blue, as are the beds of her fingernails. When she touches her forehead, Shaomi feels heat, like sun-baked bricks at high noon. Despite the antibiotics, an infection, likely sepsis from her torn organs, has taken root in the woman's body.

"Shaomi..." the pilot gasps. "It...hurts..." A tear runs down her pale, pale face.

Shaomi nods, and straightens the sheets. "Every person has their time, ordained by God. Your time is near."

"Sit...with me?" the pilot asks. Shaomi nods and kneels beside her, reaching for the other woman's hand. As their flesh touches, the pilot grasps her, fingers winding with her own in a fierce embrace.

"You...never told me...how you came to be here," the pilot gasps.

Shaomi shrugs. "What is there to tell?"

"You're...trained. You were a doctor once. I...can tell."

Shaomi shakes her head. "Not a doctor. I was a nurse. In the



city, back when they allowed women to serve in the hospitals. Our laws forbid men from seeing women unclothed, you see. We were necessary, then."

"I'm glad...you were here," the pilot gasps.

"As am I. God is merciful and wise. I am glad he brought me to you in your time of need."

Shaomi dabs at the pilot's cheeks and brow with a cloth. "Your skin is so fair. Your home must be a strange place. What was it like, growing up there?"

A ghost of a smile plays across the pilot's lips. "I am...no storyteller. My people...we record stories on...slivers of glass and light. We re-live each other's lives...through these." She brushes her fingertips across the silver plugs set into her temple.

"I cannot imagine it," Shaomi says.

"This world," the pilot whispers, "it is so barren. So bright. Different...from the hab-world where I grew up. How strange...it must be, to have open sky overhead, not steel and smoke. To feel the sun on your face."

"The green skies here are my favorite thing," Shaomi agrees. "Green has always been the color of Islam, and the colonists that first came here took their color as a sign from God that we were meant to settle here. So we did."

The pilot smiles, her pale eyes fluttering closed. "I want to rest now. So tired."

Shaomi holds the pilot's warm, living hand. The bones beneath her translucent skin are as delicate as a bird's.

Shaomi hums a tune, a child's nursery rhyme, and feels the pilot relax. Shudders travel through her body. Shaomi knows that her organs are shutting down, one by one.

Just before dawn, the pilot whispers, "Shaomi."

She opens her eyes, waking from her fitful doze. "I'm here."

"I'm...afraid..." she breathes.

Shaomi bends forward, strokes her spidersilk hair. "Don't be. You go to paradise."

The pilot looks into her eyes. She smiles a sad smile. Her voice is scarcely louder than the wind sighing over the dunes in the yard.

"I don't...believe..."

"In God?" Shaomi asks.

The pilot looks at her and nods, a brief gesture. Her breathing catches, pausing for a long moment before starting up again, faltering and weak. Her eyes are dimming, sight turning inward.

Shaomi smiles and leans forward, speaking into her ear. "It's alright. No God I know would deny paradise to one so brave."

The pilot draws one last breath, holding it for a moment before letting it out in a soft, lingering sigh. Shaomi leans her forehead against hers, her eyes closed, waiting for her to breathe again, but there's nothing. When she looks, minutes later, the outworlder's pale eyes are open and unblinking, pupils wide, and black.

Shaomi closes the lids with her fingertips. She rises, and walks to the patio. She stares out into the darkness, to the east, where soon the sun will rise.

After a time, she sighs and goes back inside. She kneels beside the other woman, then folds her hands across her breast. She looks so peaceful, the ghost of a smile still traced on her thin lips. Shaomi thinks of her last words, and bends until her lips

are just beside the pilot's ear.

"I will believe for you," she whispers.

Shaomi sits back, keeping vigil over the woman. She closes her lips on the words burning in her breast.

*I will believe, because you are God's instrument, and the E'k are no match for God. You will wipe them from the skies, and after you do the goodness in men's hearts will be restored. Men - good men - will remember themselves, and will rise. They will bring justice to men like Ali, and all those who twist the Prophet's words to their own ends. When that happens, your victory will be our victory. Insha'Allah.*

Dawn stains the eastern sky the color of lemons. Shaomi covers the Captain with a clean cloth, then waits for Ghayda. She arrives before the sun has risen above the dunes. Ghayda sees the shrouded form on the bed, and nods, wordlessly.

Together, they dress the pilot in her flight suit. Martyrs must be laid to rest in the clothes they died in, so says the law. Shaomi does not think that God will mind the slight technicality.

They carry the awkward bundle out to the water cart. They place the body inside, covering it with a burlap tarp. They struggle out into the dunes, walking until they can no longer see the rooftops behind them.

The pilot, for all her bravery, is not Muslim. No matter how much Shaomi would like to see her buried in the graveyard, it is absolutely forbidden.

They lay the pilot on the hard-packed earth. "Go fetch Yusiif and his friends," she tells Ghayda. "Tell them to bring shovels. And to be sure that none see them leave."

Ghayda nods and hurries off, leaving the pilot to Shaomi.

She has brought no water. No matter. God provides, even in the harshest desert.

Shaomi kneels beside the body and slaps her palms on the dusty earth. "*Bismil-lah*," she intones, beginning the *tayammum*. Using the clean, holy dust, she prepares the body.

She does not care that the pilot was an unbeliever, condemned by her own admission. No God she knows will care. Damn what the mullahs say.

She finishes the purification, then covers the pilot's tranquil face with the shroud once more. She kneels, waiting for Yusiif and his friends to come and dig the grave.

She does not worry that they will not come. Does not worry that someone will see them, and report back to the turban wearers and their mullahs. God will provide. God is great, and merciful. God will give them victory. *Insha'Allah*.

Overhead, in the pale green sky, amongst the yellow clouds, the silver arrowheads dart and duel, splitting the sky with sonic booms. Sometimes, one dies in a peal of thunder.

She listens to the gentle rumble, her eyes dry, watching the horizon. She removes her veil, exposing her face to the rays of the sun, unafraid for the first time in long as she can remember. The sun's caress feels good on her skin, warm, gentle as her husband's touch. She smiles, and waits for her helpers to arrive.

**Matthew Cook is the author of the dark fantasy novels *Blood Magic* and *Nights of Sin*. He also writes short stories, novellas, and the occasional magazine article. Matt lives and works in the hinterlands of Ohio, a fabled realm known for its mad cows, microbrews, and a certain college sports team named after a poisonous nut of no commercial value.**







# MERCURIO D. RIVERA

## FOR LOVE'S DELIRIUM HAUNTS THE FRACTURED MIND

**I**n the highlands overlooking Valles Marineris, human performers had erected a massive red-and-white-striped tent supported by poles planted in the orange dirt. As I steered our buzzer closer, Master Alex pointed excitedly, his light brown hair flapping in the wind, a huge smile stretched across his angelic face. He leapt out of the side of the buzzer as soon as it slowed down – even though it still hovered three feet off the ground – and bolted into a bustling crowd of humans. I took a deep breath to maintain my composure at the sight of so much concentrated beauty.

When I caught up with Master Alex inside the arena, the dazzling humans sitting on wooden benches applauded and whistled as I accompanied him down the aisle, assuming me part of the performance. I made it a point not to make eye contact with any of them. I had sworn to Lady Madeline that I'd be able to remain sufficiently clearheaded to tend to Master Alex.

A redheaded little human darted in front of me. "You're disgusting," she said, scrunching her nose.

I couldn't help but smile at her squeaky voice and adorable manner.

"Can it juggle?" she asked Master Alex.

"No, stupid," Master Alex answered. "He's no clown. He's *my* Wergen."

I suppressed a laugh. Master Alex was cuter than a Bendellion bug. How it pleased me to hear those two words. "My Wergen." I had wanted for so long to be his Wergen, Lady Madeline's Wergen. It meant that they finally considered me part of their family. For five years I had toiled in Lady Madeline's vineyards in Medusan Vallis, monitoring the fieldbots and tending to the grapes before I finally ascended to the position of household domestic and caretaker. At last I could be close to her. For the remaining year of my service, I could bask in her fluttering laughter and honey voice and revel in her devastating beauty. I could prepare Master Alex's meals and play with him. And in the course of performing my duties, I'd enjoy their clever conversations and sweet attentions and learn everything I could about their culture to report back to the Explorata.



We settled into our seats and a moment later the lights dimmed. Even in the dark I had to take deep breaths and avoided staring overtly at the throng around us. Individually, their beauty tickled me and made me feel warm and happy. Collectively, it was a force of nature, a blast of hot wind that swept through me and made my head spin. I shut my eyes for a second, but couldn't resist opening them. A male with slicked-back yellow hair over his cranium sat to my left. A female to my right, just in front of us, wore a bright blue dress that exposed the smooth flesh of her back. Another female, much older, flashed a warm smile that made me ache for Lady Madeline. It reminded me of her expression whenever she spoke to Master Alex. And all around us precious wide-eyed children perched forward in anticipation.

"I'm really happy you brought me, Joriander," Master Alex said. His innocent joy made me feel as if I floated above the clouds without a buzzer. When Lady Madeline learned she had meetings scheduled today with buyers, I had volunteered to bring Master Alex. She had initially objected, expressing concern about how functional I might be among the human crowd, but Master Alex had pleaded for her permission and I had reassured her I could still perform my duties.

Master Alex punched my arm. His touch brought a familiar tickle. "I'm sick of waiting!"

I wondered why he often behaved this way, but then I remembered that like most humans he was a single-birth. I had grown up with a brother and two sisters in my brood so I could understand that the boy's loneliness might lead to bad manners. Still, Master Alex loved me. He would call for me whenever he needed anything. And he would actually seek me out to play with him.

"Look, Joriander!" he said with a gleam in his eye.

Up-tempo music played and the parade of performers took to the stage. First came a long-limbed native to Mars, a ten-foot human who wore pinstriped attire and a tall hat that hid his head – unusual since humans ordinarily flaunted their craniums. He introduced other performers, either Earthborn humans like Lady Madeline and Master Alex or the taller Martian variety like himself.

One pair of Mars-born humans entered the arena riding atop an enormous four-legged creature with two protruding teeth, floppy ears and a prehensile limb that jutted from the center of its head. The woolly behemoth blared its disapproval of the whiplashes, but picked up various blocks and rings with its face-limb at the direction of its handlers. I marveled at its girth and power – clever humans had resurrected this animal without our help – and I noted from Master Alex's wide eyes and huge grin that, like me, he had never before seen anything like it. Other unimaginable acts followed: an Earthborn human wrestled a monstrous feline that resembled Lady Madeline's housecat, only fifty times as large and with sharp fangs; lanky Marsborn Earthers painted their faces white and hid their noses behind a red ball; and it seemed as if adjustments had been made to the gravity field on stage that allowed other performers to fly through the air and swing from ropes that dangled from high above us.

Although I had grown somewhat accustomed to human company after my six years living in Northern Mars and from

my prior excursions to Luna and Triton, moments like this reminded me of their alienness. I had no doubt that reporting today's events to the Explorata would prove to be a challenge.

The audience remained enraptured by the performances while my attention wandered to the faces around me, to the incandescent smiles and awestruck expressions.

A performer blew a whistle that startled me. That's when I saw them.

Two Wergens. Mated, tethered at the skull, their cords coiled from one open cranium into another. Their handler shoved them forward until they scuttled into the center of the stage.

The audience murmured and clapped and hooted. Several of the humans sitting near us gawked at me, pointing at the leafy *coronatis* that I wore atop my head.

The whistle blew and the Wergens grabbed hold of their cord and flung it around and around, slapping it against the ground while the human skipped over it and performed feats of agility. I was both mortified and amazed. Although I didn't know the pair, if stationed here they could only be cultural ambassadors like me. Their treatment plainly violated the treaty between our peoples. But as I gazed into their eyes I saw their love for the man with the whistle. I could imagine them objecting at first but then relenting before the persuasions of his striking beauty. After a few moments he blew the whistle again and the Wergens positioned themselves farther away from one another, stretching their tether seven to eight feet apart. The humans took turns taking a flying leap over the taut tether and landing with a flourish. One of them climbed atop a bouncing stick that sprung over the cord. The audience erupted in applause.

I rubbed my shoulders nervously. Breaking the tether would mean instant death to the pair.

"What's that thing coming out of their heads?" Master Alex asked.

I was too embarrassed to discuss Wergen tethering.

At that moment a cloaked figure rose from the crowd and took center stage. Several performers stopped in their tracks and the music came to an abrupt halt. She had the unmistakable size and shape of a Wergen, wide and squat with white scales visible on her bare legs. Perhaps she felt ill because at that moment she raised a blue inhaler to her breathing canal and took a deep whiff.

"Freedom!" she shouted, raising her arms skyward. "Freedom from love!"

She dropped her robes, revealing the glow of a blue bodyfield that grew blindingly brighter.

I hurled myself at Master Alex and pinned him to the floor as the deafening explosion rocked the arena and shook the ground and the world around us went dark.

**I sat up** and gasped.

Lady Madeline gently pushed me back down onto the bed. "It's okay, Joriander. You're fine." Her touch immediately soothed me and slowed the beating of my racing hearts.

"Master Alex...!"

"He's unhurt. Your body shielded him from the blast."

I felt sore and confused, but none of it mattered with Lady Madeline sitting at the edge of my bed. Two medbots skittered across my leg, injecting and slicing at my right foot, which was



sheathed in a bloody bandage. Having this additional Wergen tech inside the house violated the terms of her contract, but Lady Madeline had obviously made an exception for my injury.

Master Alex stood in the corner of the room wearing a worried expression.

"Are you okay, Joriander? Can you play with me?"

"Alex, please go outside," Lady Madeline said. "I need to talk to Joriander alone."

The boy peered over his shoulder at me as he reluctantly exited the room.

Lady Madeline turned to me. "Others in attendance were not as fortunate as you and Alex. They're still pulling bodies from the rubble."

I gasped and rubbed my shoulders. I'd read reports of similar incidents in colonies on Titan and Earth, but I couldn't believe that it had happened here and that a Wergen could be capable of such an act. "I should go help..." I shooed away the medbots and tried to sit up without success.

"Spare me any further heroics, okay?" Lady Madeline said. "You'd only cause a commotion if you showed up down there. No, you Wergens have done more than enough." She glared at me. "The medics on the scene didn't have the means – or the inclination – to treat you, so I had you transported here, where your bots could tend to you."

I couldn't bear it when she glowered at me this way. It was as if I'd scarred her beautiful face with displeasure. It hurt even more than my throbbing foot.

"It's just a small group of disturbed fanatics committing these acts," I said.

"I'm sure that information will be of great comfort to the parents of the victims." Her lips trembled.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Whoever's responsible will be captured and executed by the Explorata. Violence against your people – even the mere thought of it – is anathema to us. You know that." I dared to reach out and touch her arm, but she pulled away and stood up. "I can't pretend to understand what drives these extremists to turn their back on love."

To this, she said nothing. She walked to the bay windows and pulled open the curtains. Phobos hovered partially behind Olympus Mons and the sky had darkened to a muted blue we knew comforted the humans. The force field my people had erected over the Amazonis Quadrangle tinted the orange sky blue and made Northeastern Mars fully habitable, just like Europa and Triton and so many other locations that our fieldtech had transformed into suitable spots for joint human/Wergen colonization. We'd given the humans the galaxy. All that we asked for in return was the pleasure of their company.

"I've brought in the Wergen assigned to the vineyards to tend to the house while you recuperate," Lady Madeline said. "You can move to the guesthouse in the meantime."

"Trax? There's no need. I'm already feeling better." The thought of Trax stepping foot inside the main house made me want to scrub my scales. He had worked in the vineyards for only twenty months while I had put in more than four years there – hoping every day for a fleeting glance of the humans. That Trax might benefit from my injury and prematurely receive the loving attention of Master Alex and Lady Madeline seemed utterly unfair. He could wait his turn like I did.

I lumbered to my feet, the medbots scuttling around my ankles. "See?" I suppressed a wince. "I'm fine."

Lady Madeline turned and regarded me with a mixture of pity and contempt. "Why do you have to be this way, Joriander?" she said.

I didn't know how to respond.

After a pause, she sighed deeply. "Fine then, if it makes you happy go ahead and prepare our dinner. And the kitchen is a sty."

She marched past my bed, avoiding my eyes as always. When she got to the doorway, she paused, her back still to me. "Thank you, Joriander. Thank you for protecting Alex."

She continued down the hall without looking back.

Lady Madeline had thanked me! If my foot could have tolerated it, I would have jumped for joy.

**When I limped** down the stairs and into the kitchen, I found Trax there, scrubbing the floors on hands and knees.

"Joriander," he said, startled at my appearance. "You're not well. You should be resting."

"You can return to the guesthouse," I said. "I'll be in touch tomorrow about the status of the fieldbots."

Trax swallowed hard before responding. "I can't tell you how pleased I am to see you've recovered so quickly." But he spoke these words in our native tongue, which made his true feelings quite evident. "Has Lady Madeline approved my reassignment?"

"Don't question me, Trax. Your day will come," I said. "In the meantime, you can serve your term in the fields like I did."

"Why can't we both –"

"You know why." Lady Madeline had specifically negotiated the terms of our assignment here, forbidding more than a single Wergen at a time from staying inside the house.

"What if she decides to move off-world? What if I never get what's coming to me after all my sacrifices?" His jaw dislocated and clicked left and right. "How can you expect me to simply walk away from such beauty?"

"I'm sorry, Trax."

He whirled about and stormed out of the kitchen onto the veranda.

I surveyed the counters littered with dirty dishes and spoiled food that Trax had failed to refrigerate. He knew nothing about the humans' exotic diet, the proteins they consumed from the flesh of other creatures. It would take me several hours to clean and reorganize. Of course bots could have accomplished the same task in a few minutes, but my people had attached some conditions to the technology they had provided Lady Madeline. She was required to interact with me regularly. That meant allowing me in her home and not using bots to replace the labor I provided. I didn't think Lady Madeline had exactly lived up to the spirit of the bargain given how often she retreated to her room whenever I worked inside the house.

After I finished in the kitchen, I escaped to the veranda overlooking the vineyards and sat on a stone bench to rest my foot. I munched on some sweet *chakra*.

The warm breeze made me sleepy and just as my eyes started to flutter, a rustling in the grapevines startled me.

I rose and leaned over the edge. It was difficult to see in



Phobos's dim moonlight but something scuttled in the dusty path between the vines below me.

Since the fieldbots didn't operate at night I could only assume that Trax had deigned to intrude once again upon the sanctity of the main house. The clunk of heavy footsteps grew louder and a figure emerged, shorter and wider than Trax, but unmistakably Wergen.

"Who are you?" I said. "What do you want?"

"Joriander?"

I didn't respond.

"Are the humans asleep?"

The voice sounded familiar but I couldn't place it.

"How do you know my name? You don't belong here."

He stepped out of the darkness, the porchlights illuminating his face. "Joriander, it's me. Korte."

My brother. The Explorata had assigned him to the colonization of Langalana, a planet hundreds of light years away. When last I heard from him he had been matched with a mate. I never imagined I would see him again.

"You weren't tethered?" I said, stating the obvious.

"My mate spurned me," he said. He gazed towards the heavens as if it were Langalana orbiting Mars and not Phobos and Deimos. "A lovely mate with a lovely name – Shimera, my perfect genetic match – and yet when she first saw me she fled into that world's scarlet grasslands. She claimed to be hopelessly in love – with a human. So deeply in love that she refused to tether with me."

I unlocked my jaw in shock. Yes, we loved the humans, but no Wergen would ever spurn his or her genetic match. We all bore a responsibility to tether and to propagate.

"It was a sobering experience." He continued speaking as he climbed the stone steps up to the veranda. "I left Langalana at the first opportunity. And in colonies across the Milky Way I've met others of our kind who have suffered the same type of humiliation."

"I can't believe this."

Korte laid his hands on my shoulders in greeting. "Do you remember studying bot-tech together on Werg? Before our encounter with humans? If only we could go back to those days when we could proudly call ourselves Wergen." He reached down and plucked a *chapra* leaf out of the bowl on the ledge. "What about you, brother? How did you wind up here?"

"I spent some time on Triton, a satellite in the outer solar system," I said, "assisting a human in his search for his missing mate. Can you imagine?" Nothing drove home how truly alien the humans were more than the notion of untethered mates. But then I remembered Korte's situation, how his mate had refused to tether with him, and thought it best to change the subject. "When I returned to the inner system, the Explorata assigned me to work with Lady Madeline and to continue our study of human culture. Why are you here, Korte?"

After a long pause he said, "I came for a very specific purpose, brother. I'm here to free you."

"Free me?" I laughed. "From what? Do you know how many Wergens envy me for this position?"

"Don't you see what's happened to you?"

"I don't understand."

"You've been enslaved and don't even realize it. What you feel

around humans, that giddiness, that false happiness, is purely the result of biochemical processes we don't understand."

"As are all emotions." I glanced back to see if any lights had turned on inside the house. "Korte, you need to leave. If someone were to see you..."

He reached into his robes and removed a metal inhaler and displayed it to me. "This is a Suppressor."

I took a step back at the sight of the blue device, the same type of inhaler the circus murderer had used. "No."

"Take a deep, single breath and it will allow you to view the humans through unfiltered eyes for several days. It affects the cell swaths of the upper mandible. We don't understand how human seduction works on us, but this compound blocks the neural receptors and allows us to resist their charms."

"You're one of them?" I said. "A member of my brood. My own brother."

"This can set you free."

I shook my head. "We shouldn't be trying to free ourselves from love, we should be celebrating it. What I feel for Lady Madeline and Master Alex brings me great joy, Korte."

Korte's face contorted in disgust. "Listen to yourself! 'Master Alex', 'Lady Madeline'. They are not your masters, and you were not born to be subservient to them." When he saw my downcast eyes, he said, "I know that their presence makes you feel good...but is it truly love if it's physiological, irresistible?"

"You can say that about a father's love for his offspring, about—"

"What you feel is unnatural!" he said. "We're on the verge of being conquered, Joriander. By a false love."

His words made no sense. "We're the ones who offered them our bots and fieldtech and ships in exchange for their companionship. The humans didn't demand this."

"We're at war. You just don't know it." He had the desperate air of a mortally wounded soldier. "We're losing the desire to breed and propagate. It's the end of our species. And what a miserable end it is! Taking our last breath as fatuous, fawning—"

"Lower your voice!"

"—pathetic slaves. And we don't even realize it!"

"Don't you think the Explorata considered all of this when negotiating the Joint Venture Compact with Earth? This is why we only have a small number of Wergens stationed on any particular colony—"

"The members of the Explorata who negotiated those agreements are no more immune to the humans' charms than you are! It was the humans who demanded caps on the numbers of Wergens permitted on any colony."

"They were being cautious. They feared invasion and conquest."

"It wasn't fear of conquest that drove their demands." He smiled angrily. "All this time living with them and you still don't understand, do you? *They loathe us*. The mere sight of us sickens them."

I couldn't accept this. Yes, we sometimes made the humans uncomfortable, but Lady Madeline and Master Alex had great affection for me. "You're wrong."

"Is *this* love?" he said. His eyes darkened and swirled and I realized he wore recording lenses. He projected a holographic



image of the tethered Wergens performing on stage, the female Wergen stepping out of the audience, the blinding flash that preceded the explosion. "Now others can learn of the indignities, and of the noble sacrifices that have been made. Others of our kind, not yet exposed to these humans, can see the dangers. And they can understand that there's reason to hope. We can still conquer love, Joriander."

"What about the innocent –"

"There's nothing innocent about them. And I'm not asking you to kill them, though they deserve it." His lenses flickered and the projections shut off. "I'm here only because you're my brother and you deserve to be free." He placed the inhaler in the palm of my hand and closed my fingers over it. "Take this and use it. And then spend a few minutes with your beloved slavemasters. If you still feel that same undying devotion towards them, so be it. But the Suppressor will allow you to break the spell that binds you to them, Joriander. At last you'll be able to hate."

"That's what I'm supposed to aspire to? Hatred?"

"Not hate for hate's sake. But hate for what it represents. Freedom. The freedom, the dignity, of being true to ourselves."

"My feelings *are* true."

"Then you have nothing to fear." He pressed his hand against my chest as if to feel the beating of my upper heart. "There's a revolution coming. I hope you'll be part of it." He leaned in and whispered, "Freedom. Freedom from love!"

With those words he turned and made his way into the vineyards. And as his silhouette disappeared into the cool night, I knew only fear. Fear of what he might do next.

**The next morning,** I sat in my room and stared at the metal inhaler in my hand. Korte's ravings had kept me awake all night. His suggestion that we were somehow at war with the humans was madness. Our technological superiority was beyond question. With a simple command our bots could destroy Earth and every human in the joint colonies in one fell swoop. Yes, the humans elicited profound feelings in us – no one could resist their beauty and cleverness – but why was this wrong? We felt what we felt.

No, best to dispose of this drug and to forget Korte's troubled words. Could all of this be the result of what happened with his mate on Langalana? Could she truly have refused to tether with him? Then I thought about the tethered Wergens at the show yesterday. The love and devotion on their faces as they debased themselves in front of the human audience.

My hands shaking, I slid my fingers along the side of the inhaler and viewed myself in the mirror. Humans constantly reminded themselves of their beauty by studying their reflections in this manner. But I saw only the ugliness of self-doubt in my visage. How could I go about my daily chores wondering whether my feelings for Lady Madeline and Master Alex were real? And what did it say about me that I even entertained such thoughts? I loved them. Of that I had no doubt. Surely my love could withstand whatever temporary numbing effect this chemical provided.

I placed the inhaler over my nasal canal and took a deep whiff.

"Joriander!" Master Alex screeched from the hallway.

I shoved the inhaler beneath my sleeping mat just as he flung open the door.

"It's playtime!" he said.

I followed him downstairs to the living room where Lady Madeline waited for me. I felt off balance, as if the floor beneath me had a slight tilt to it I'd never noticed it before.

"How can I serve you, Lady Madeline?"

She cringed as I approached. "Keep Alex busy for the next couple of hours. I have calls to make to buyers in the Amazonis Quadrangle."

She seemed unfamiliar somehow. Normally she had an aura about her – warm, soft lighting that shimmered along the edges of her body. But now I just saw sallow flesh and a pronounced sneer on an alien face.

"About yesterday," she said. "I'm sorry if I was a bit short with you, but you have to understand, I was in shock. I still am." She paused. "It might be best if you don't go into town today to run any errands for me. It might be dangerous given what happened."

Normally I would have been touched by her concern for my well-being, but today it all seemed...different. I had a better sense of her real apprehension. She simply wanted to protect her Wergen servant, her property.

"Why are you just standing there, Joriander?" she said.

I would usually exult in her attention, the fact that she'd addressed me directly by name, but today I recognized that she simply wanted me out of the way and tending to Master Alex as quickly as possible.

"I asked you a question," she said.

"I'm fine."

"Then get to it. Alex is waiting outside."

I made my way out the kitchen doorway to the veranda, then down the stairs to the dirt path that led through the vineyards. The sunlight and fresh air would help clear my head. Alex had gotten a head-start and raced ahead of me, swerving in and out from behind the plants. He'd switched into one of his costumes and activated a VR bracelet that sent miniature spaceships buzzing around his head while he swatted at them with a holo-sword. Whatever effect Korte's drug had on me, I still found Alex adorable, I still found his imagination amusing.

"Joriander!" he said. He raced around me wielding his sword and pretending to stab me with it. "Get down on your knees, alien."

Normally I would've complied in an instant but today I found his request distasteful.

"I said bow down!" His fleshy lips sneered; his sickeningly smooth-skinned face took on a grotesque expression.

"I'm still not feeling well, Alex –"

"Shut up!" he screamed. "Bend down!"

"Run ahead and chase some VR ships."

His alien face turned a red shade. "Why. Won't. You. Play with me!" He stabbed at my bandaged foot with his sword and I recoiled from the pain. Without thinking, I shoved him backwards and he landed hard against the ground, his head snapping back and hitting a rock. He bawled like a wounded desert-trog and blood trickled down the side of his temple. His howls startled me out of my stupor.

What had I done?



I picked him up and staggered toward the house, signaling to the medbots which awaited us on the porch alongside Madeline, who had no doubt heard Alex's screams. He struggled in my arms.

"What happened? Did you fall?" she said, snatching him from me.

"Joriander! He... He..." he said. He gulped in heaps of air.

Madeline held him still while the medbots swarmed over him, stitching the wound and spraying it with disinfectant.

"Jor... Jor..."

"Joriander's right here," Madeline said. "Now hush"

Water trickled from his eyes down his smooth face.

And after a few minutes of soft crying the words finally came.

"He pushed me! Joriander pushed me!"

Madeline paused and looked at me apologetically. Then she turned back to the boy. "Alex!" She leaned down so her face was only inches away from his. "Stop it! You know I don't like it when you fib."

Her scolding tone shocked the boy out of his crying jag.

"Joriander loves us. He risked his life to save you!" she said.

"Why, he couldn't hurt us if he wanted to. Isn't that right, Joriander?"

I nodded, but instead of feeling happiness at Madeline's faith in me, I felt only a deep shame.

When I went to bed that evening I resolved never again to use the inhaler. What I had done to Alex was monstrous, unforgivable. Korte's drug, I realized, didn't 'free' me from anything. It distorted the real world; it transformed beauty into hideousness and suppressed my true feelings. No, it was Korte and the misguided rebels who needed to be 'freed' – from the effects of this drug.

**I slept late** – perhaps another side-effect of the inhalant – so I was surprised Alex hadn't come bursting through my door the next morning, barking orders at me to play with him. Because the drug's effects could last several days, I decided to avoid Alex and Madeline and devote the day to scrubbing the floors and supervising Trax's work in the fields. It wouldn't be too difficult to limit my interactions with them until I felt more like myself.

I strode past Madeline's room and poked my head in. She'd made her bed today. I heard voices downstairs, Alex shrieking a command at someone. This was unusual since he never spoke in such a manner to his mother. I descended the winding staircase to the living room.

I found Madeline sitting on the couch, two Wergens wearing the green uniforms of the Explorata on each side of her. The officers' eyes flitted in my direction then returned to staring at her adoringly.

"Here he is," she said to the officers.

One of them made a gesture with his fingers without taking his eyes off Madeline and several dozen security-bots skittered past my feet and up the staircase. Five remained behind and surrounded me.

"Joriander," one of the officers said. "Lady Madeline summoned us because of a serious charge that has been leveled against you. You were seen consorting two nights ago with someone. An individual believed to be connected to the rebels."

I froze. Someone had seen me with Korte?

Madeline stood up and approached me. "Tell me it's not true." "I'm devoted to you, Madeline. Completely, with every fiber of my being."

"Did you meet with one of them *on my property*?"

"I condemn them. I reject what they stand for. You know that!"

"Answer my question!"

At that moment the bots scuttled down the stairs and into the living room carrying the metal inhaler I had hidden under my bed-matting. One of the officers plucked the inhaler from a bot's pincers and held it at a distance, as if it were a poisonous perpuffer.

Madeline's brow furrowed and she placed a hand over her mouth. "I gave you what you wanted. I let you into my house. I left my son in your care!" Spittle spewed out of her mouth and her contorted face accentuated her alien features: her savage brow and round hairy cranium, the skin-covered bone that jutted out of the center of her flat scale-less face. "And this is how you repay my kindness?"

Kindness? I had trouble at that moment recollecting a single instance of kindness or compassion in my time with her. How could I ever have seen things so differently?

"I've done nothing but serve you faithfully," I said. I had to avert my eyes; not because of her beauty but because I couldn't bear her hideousness.

"He's one of them," she announced and turned her back to me. "Get him as far away from my son as possible."

"Madeline!" I said. One of the officers shoved me forward as I continued to shout her name.

And as they led me out the front door, one of the officers said to the other, "To be surrounded by such striking beauty...and to throw it all away."

I spotted Alex on the veranda as we exited the house. He was dueling with Trax, barking out orders to him in a sharp unpleasant tone that was difficult to tolerate even from this distance. Trax, smiling ecstatically, looked in my direction. His smile faded.

And I knew at that instant that he had been the one who spotted me talking with Korte. He had been the one who reported me to Madeline.

**"We're blinded by love,"** I said.

The officer set down two bowls filled with salt pellets and Bendellion bhar-roots. I lifted up the deep dishes from the table and poured their contents down my gullet, storing the food in my phagal pouch so I could continue speaking while I ate.

"Now you decide to talk?" he said. The officer was young, a fresh recruit with barely hardened scales. "A bit late for that, don't you think?"

"Perhaps." I'd refused to answer their questions because I knew they had no interest in hearing the truth. The truth of our subjugation to the humans. Teams of doctors and diplomats had tried to persuade me to reveal what I knew about the rebels, but I'd refused to tell them anything about my brother, about the coming revolution. Instead, I urged them to try out the Suppressor, to see the humans as they truly were, but this only produced shaking heads and whistles of disapproval and further medical evaluations. The drug, they insisted, had dam-



aged my neural swaths. It had skewed my perception of the humans' true beauty.

They even tried to seduce information out of me through human interrogation, but the lingering effects of the inhalant protected me. My questioners were unaware of the temporary nature of my immunity. How much longer could I resist? Korte had said the drug's effect would only last several days.

"Let me ask you something," I said. "What good is love if it's unreciprocated? What purpose does it serve other than to debase us?"

"You're speaking nonsense," he said. "And treason." But I could tell by the way he rubbed his shoulders that my question had shaken him.

"When I look back at how misguided I was, the years I wasted..." I said.

"This is not a productive use of your time. I suggest that you clear your mind and savor your meal."

The fluorescent light flickered and the door irised open. A dozen bots scuttled into the room.

The young officer accompanied me down a long white-walled corridor and we entered a vacant room with a chair at its center. He guided me to the seat and a force field strip activated around the armrests and legs, holding my wrists and feet in place. One of the walls was made of glass and behind it sat an audience of several dozen humans, most of them, I had been told, relatives of the victims of the circus blast.

The Explorata officer froze at the sight of the mostly human crowd and I, too, felt a wave of titillation wash over my cranium. The Suppressor's residual effects were waning.

Then I saw them.

Madeline and Alex occupied the front row with Trax. She stared at me impassively. I was her Wergen. It made sense she'd feel obliged to attend.

At that moment I spotted a familiar face on the other side of the glass standing guard in the rear behind the seated humans, dressed in an Explorata uniform.

Korte.

He'd come to Mars for another reason besides freeing his brother. He'd apparently infiltrated the Explorata's ranks long ago. So maybe we did still stand a chance. Maybe someday we would be free from love. He gazed at me with an intense concentration that indicated his recording lenses were activated.

A black bot skittered up my leg and torso and rested on my left shoulder.

Alex jumped to his feet and pointed excitedly in my direction. I felt the old, familiar rush in my hearts and in my head at the prospect that he might ask me to play with him. Then I realized he was pointing at the bot on my shoulder. His mother pulled him back, seemingly scolding him. Just seeing Alex made me want to smile and laugh.

*No! Stop it!* I took deep breaths and tried to draw on specific memories from when I had seen them after using the Suppressor. Madeline's scowl. Her contempt for me. Master Alex's screeching orders and disrespect. A spark of hate came back. And I tried to make it glow brighter inside my head.

Madeline sat there with Trax at her side. I thought I saw something in her moist eyes. A trace of regret? Sorrow? But then she blinked and it was gone.

The bot on my shoulder released a long syringe from its carapace and plungered it between the scales on my jaw.

I winced and the humans leaned forward in anticipation. It reminded me of the audience at the circus.

A warm tingle coursed through my body, though I couldn't say whether it was the result of the injection or the pleasure that I felt at bringing joy to these humans at this moment.

*Fight it!* The audience became blurry. That was good. Maybe if I couldn't see them clearly, I'd be able to hold on to my blessed hatred. Maybe I could nurture it and make it grow and take my final breaths with dignity, as a free Wergen.

I searched for Korte in the fuzzy crowd, but I couldn't find him.

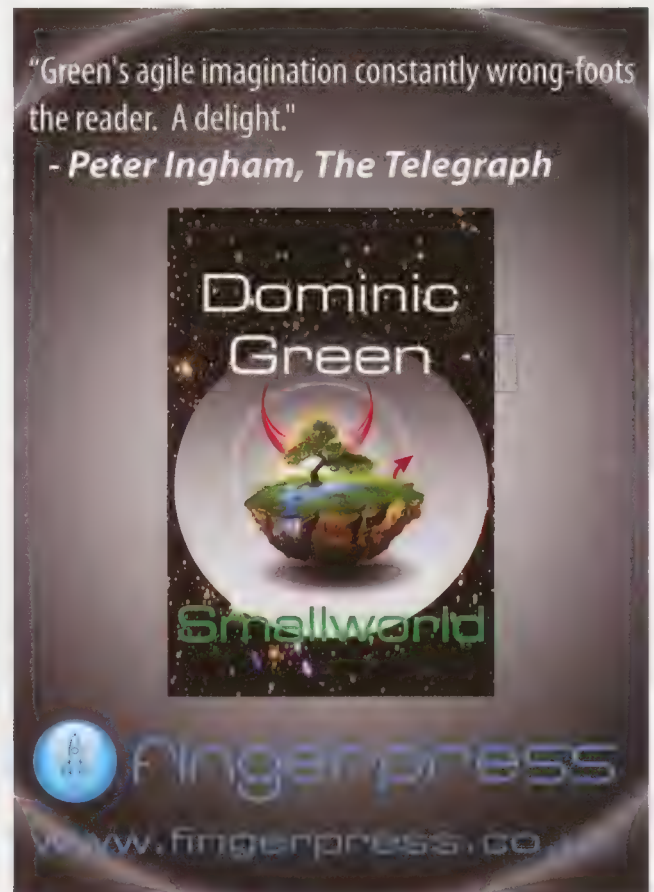
I saw only Trax and his silly grin as he played on the floor at Lady Madeline's feet with Master Alex.

*Hold on to it!*

I struggled to embrace the sweet hate, but the only one I truly loathed was Trax. And I hated him profoundly, with all my heart. I hated him because he got to be with Master Alex and the beautiful Lady Madeline.

I hated him because he'd taken my place.

**This is the third story set in the Wergen universe to appear in *Interzone* and a fourth, entitled 'Tethered', is forthcoming. Mercurio's fiction has been published in *Nature*, *Murky Depths*, *Sybil's Garage*, *Interzone's* sister magazine *Black Static* (with the extremely well received 'Tu Sufrimiento Shall Protect Us') and elsewhere. His website is [mercuriorivera.com](http://mercuriorivera.com).**





# Jon Wallace

## The Walrus and the Icebreaker

### 68° North, Dolphin and Union Strait, Day 5

Jorgen took four months to grow in the lab back in Ilulisat. I lost three of his twin brothers in the acceleration process, two more dying of what must have been some kind of residual shock during the journey out. His birth, even in this day and age, was a miracle with the facilities I had.

And here I am strapping a torpedo to his back.

A group of drunk, shivering sailors have arranged themselves behind us on deck, to laugh at the mocked dignity of this magnificent pink and bubbly-skinned giant. I don't think Jorgen minds them laughing at him. It seems to lift their spirits.

I rub my hands through his mystacial vibrissae, or moustache as I think he would call it. He seems to enjoy that and grins. He blinks when I breathe mist in his face. I tap him on the left tusk and show him the *reconnoltre* signal. He swims away, diving under the thin ice and tearing off around the tank. The torpedo strap holds. The drunks cheer him on and I smile, proud of him.

*You are going to make a noble sacrifice.*

He is happy enough out here on deck, it's more space than he's ever had, but I'm frustrated. We need to get into the sea and practise, but the captain refuses to deploy the training pen until drilling is underway, and who the hell knows when that's going to happen. *Julie*, the white submersible, hangs from a crane over Jorgen's tank, swinging in the cutting wind. I haven't taken her out since I've been here.

After an hour I can barely pick the horizon out of the white sea and sky. I take a swab from Jorgen's mouth, toss him a few sea cucumbers as payment for his good work, and head inside. The sailors follow me, chattering in strange voices that are muffled by balaclavas and the numb Arctic wind.

### 70° North, Beaufort Sea, Day 6

Captain Stan looks beaten to me. Eager to get the torture over and get sunk today, go down and meet Davy Jones. He hasn't said anything openly seditious yet but his every word drips with disbelief.

You can feel he's lost the men. Presumably they're still shaken after the missile strike. Can't be good for morale to have seen the three other icebreakers go to the bottom.

Glad I missed that.

We've all assembled in the enormous briefing hall, aft and three decks down. Stan is slumped on a podium, lit up like a Christmas tree, while the rest of us huddle in red emergency lighting.

"Now that we're the only breaker left," continues the captain, "the escorts are going to bunch up around us. I can assure you even with the losses we've taken, there are enough ships to make it through another missile strike."

*And what about the one after that? think nine hundred crew.*

*"Just flown out to join us is Doctor Lewis."*

He points me out. Terrific. I needed the attention.

"She's from SOSEC. I want you to pay her every courtesy. Disrespect will be frowned upon."

I hear that being 'frowned upon' involves going for a swim. Discipline has been getting harsher. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't glad about it. I've never had looks like I'm getting around here.

The half-starved, hollow-eyed conscripts scare the hell out of me. They've been at sea for four months, trying to locate, drill and recover twenty million barrels before the enemy fleet strikes again. Living conditions are pretty much 15th century. They drink ship rum and snow melt and eat only what the weevils scorn. Specialists like me and the oil riggers get a cabin, but otherwise there are nine men to fight over each bunk. The stink, cold, and airlessness below deck are driving most of them to the edge.

The Arctic night makes it worse. We live in darkness. Top-side runs blacked out to hide us from enemy drones. The lights are out below deck too, conserving reactor power. Only the occasional torch beam or dim red emergency strip interrupts the gloom. The crew are on the brink of frenzy.

Stan needs to tell them why this mission is so important. He needs to remind them how bad things are back home. Trouble is, he doesn't remember what it's like. None of them do.



ILLUSTRATED BY MARK PEXTON





I think about going up there and telling them myself. I could talk about the ninety-two day Louisville food riot, the battle that killed my two brothers. I could show them pictures of the Eastern Seaboard I took from a government gyrocopter, of the drowned cities and the starving survivors. I could say that if we don't secure a new oil supply, there'll be no home to return to, that we have no choice but to find it before the enemy do.

But I won't do it. It wouldn't do any good. The crew's memories are gone. All they think about now is light.

### 69° North, Coronation Gulf, Day 7

I am top-side, practising with Jorgen, when the siren starts to wail. A few of the gyrocopters begin to power up on deck but they've been too slow. My eyes rest on one destroyer, the *Rainmaker*, the one that's been sailing alongside since I've been here. I make out figures sprinting across the deck as red emergency lights flicker on.

Decoy flares shoot into the sky. Tracer fire screams across the night. There's a huge explosion on the horizon, finally some colour on the sheet of white sky. Then there are more, all around me. I can just see the smoke trails now, whipping along a few metres over the thin ice. They are lit up against the clouds by the fires of our burning ships.

I fall onto my knees, suddenly unable to breathe. Fear like I have never known crushes my heart and clots my thoughts. I tumble off the gantry and drop into the tank. Jorgen swims around me curiously, light from the detonations dancing around him in the water. If he had any sense, if he knew what I expected of him, he would let me drown. But it's all a game to him.

He puts his face next to mine and his rough whiskers brush my cheek. He knocks me gently with a tusk and lifts me up on his back. I manage to bend my senseless fingers around the torpedo strap and he lifts me up out of the water, hurling me back onto the deck.

Just in time to see the *Rainmaker* explode. Just in time to see a molten orange wound flare up on its hull, a flare in the twilight. A hot wind flows over my face. I smile. Heat and light are at a premium. You take them where you can.

### 68° North, Queen Maud Gulf, Day 9

Mutiny, it turns out, isn't pretty. I make it to my quarters by the skin of my teeth, then stand with my back pressed to the door for about eleven hours, listening to the shooting on the lower decks.

The marines corner the rebellious crew in the oil-free hold and slaughter them – around a hundred souls. Shooting would have been incredibly dangerous anywhere else, but as they were a distance from the reactor they went wild.

Afterwards they seal the deck, so I'm not allowed to go up and see Jorgen. Instead I visit the bar and get to know some filthy, ship-made rum. It's heaving in there. Frostbitten, chilblained faces cling to every surface like barnacles. All these bodies make it a little warmer, but the air is nothing but sweat, steam and mucus. I am no longer sufficiently scared of the crew to avoid a public spot like this. I am far more frightened of dying sober.

The ship's drill master joins me, presumably out of some idea

of shared redundancy. Well, that's better than the sailors who beg me for last chance sex.

"Why didn't we shoot back," I ask, "during the missile attack?"

The drill master sags and swallows his rum.

"Nothing to shoot. Shortly before you arrived we spotted their main fleet in the Foxe Basin. Stan launched every last missile we had in one gigantic effort to finish them off, but the enemy has some kind of countermeasure.

"We didn't hit a thing, just gave away our position. It'll be another two weeks before we're re-armed, and it'll just be the same ordnance as before. Of course the enemy will need to re-supply too – they can't have much in their launchers after that last attack. That gives us some space, but when they do strike again we're all headed to the bottom."

"How did the captain die?"

The drill master looks angry for a moment and drinks.

"Beech is in charge now. Senior marine. Three of the remaining escorts have run off, did you know that? There's only four ships left in the screen."

"So what is the plan?"

"It hasn't changed. If we go back with an empty hold they'll shoot Beech along with the rest of us. All he can do is keep sailing around taking seismic surveys and pray that we strike. Then he has to pray we can recover twenty million barrels without being spotted by the enemy fleet and attacked. Then he has to pray that one icebreaker rig and four escorts can defend this theoretical oil paradise until relief arrives."

"You don't seem to fancy our chances of finding a field."

"No, I don't. We're being too haphazard about it, we move too fast to properly survey any area. The captain won't – at least he wouldn't – slow down for long enough. He wouldn't stay in one spot."

"I have the same problem."

"Oh yes," he says. "Your creature."

"I've not been in the sea with him once. It's insane."

The drill master laughs and rubs his eyes. He's exhausted. Everyone is. Endless night and no sleep. "I presume he's some kind of weapon?"

"Search and destroy," I say. "That's his mission. Attach a torpedo to his back and Jorgen will swim it right into the biggest ship he can find."

"At last report the enemy fleet had six rigs and around seventy escorts. You think sinking one ship will change our situation?"

I shake my head and order another rum from the marine behind the bar.

"No, I can't make a difference to this fight – but if Jorgen is successful the navy will fund my work. I'll probably get the money to create a whole Walrus Corps."

"That's very optimistic."

"Not really. After this catastrophe they'll need all the options they can get."

"Not that," says the drill master, stealing my rum and downing it. "I mean it's very optimistic to think you're going to survive."

He smiles and leans in close.

"Do you want to come back to my place?"

### 71° North, McClintock Channel, Day 12



"Nothing to be afraid of. Just trying to figure out who everybody is on this ship. It's important I know where everyone stands."

Beech stares at me and chews. He's not what I expected. He doesn't stand out physically – his eyes are bloodshot, his beard is thick and greasy, his combats are damp and he's developed a kind of hunch from spending too much time below deck. Just like any of the crew, really. He is obviously utterly insane. Full-on cabin fever, there's no doubt. There is a sprinkling of dark blue navy uniforms but most people here are marines. Everybody is very still and very quiet.

"So tell me, Lewis," says Beech, "can your monster really do what you're promising?"

"Yes, sir, he can sink a ship, no problem. He certainly stands a better chance than our missiles. From what I understand our attacks are thrown off target by some advanced chaff the enemy has, yes?"

He chews some more, wondering whether to hurl me into the sea just for knowing too much.

"That's right," he says, turning away from me and strolling to the other side of the bridge.

Snow is swirling in the howling wind outside. The gyrocopters are tied down on the deck under grey tarpaulins. The tarps are ribbed with tension so that the bow looks like it's sprinkled with oysters.

Beech turns around.

"I appreciate your creature won't be bothered by chaff – but what about RO subs?"

"No problem. Remote submarines won't notice him unless they are close enough to pick up the torpedo signature. Even in that case Jorgen can swim better than any RO sub on the planet."

He nods. "I understand you've not been able to carry out the training you need. That's not going to be a problem anymore. We'll slow down and take a survey. You'll be able to deploy your training pen."

"Thank you."

"I intend to use every method we have at our disposal to fight the enemy more effectively. We'll be heading further north, where there's still some thick ice and persistent cloud and their drones won't spot us so easy. How long will it take you to be ready for action?"

I shrug. "Maybe two weeks?"

"Four days," he says. "Be ready in four days. If you're not ready by then we'll have to reassess the situation."

I don't like the sound of that. I consider thanking him and leaving but I need to broach an awkward topic. I should be a lot more cautious about it but I'm still not really handling my ship rum too well.

"Look," I say, "Jorgen will only be able to take down one of their ships. He's not a wonder weapon or anything."

Beech steps closer to me, chewing. "He will be. I intend to strap one of our nuclear warheads to his back. That should even up the odds."

"May I point out a flaw in that plan?"

It just slipped out. The crew try not to snap their heads around and gape at me. They know this isn't the time for questioning orders. Beech seems unaffected.

"Go on."

I clear my throat. I can tell the rest of the crew really would rather I kept my mouth shut, but it's too late now.

"Well, sir, I thought we were here to locate oil. Won't we be in trouble if we irradiate prospective fields?"

Beech folds his arms. "This is now a military operation. Destroying the enemy fleet is the priority. Besides, the drill master is optimistic about our next site."

"But we wouldn't be able to come back to recover more oil. A nuclear strike would make it impossible. I thought the whole point is to establish a steady future supply..."

Beech yawns violently, drool hanging between his lips. I can see a piece of gum squeezed into his yellow back teeth. He stares at me for a moment, then suddenly grins wildly, his eyes bulging white and his lips pulled tight over his teeth. It is like a completely different person is standing before me.

Then, suddenly, the old Beech is back, frowning and chewing. "Dismissed," he says.

### 74° North, Viscount Melville Sound, Day 14

I supervise the lowering of the training pen. Undeployed it is about the size of a cargo container, but in the water the buoyed and packed wire mesh plates unfold into a cage with the circumference of a nautical mile, a depth of 150 metres.

Jorgen goes in next. I pack him into the harness personally. He makes an awful lot of noise about it but I think it's excitement as opposed to distress.

I follow him down, standing on *Julie* as the crane drops her gently into the centre of the pen. Jorgen splashes around the sub and makes an exhibition of himself. A few of the drunks watch me wistfully. I realise they are sad because they think I'm going to die out here and they'll never get their chance for that sex they were counting on.

I watch the icebreaker move away, wanting it to be well clear before we start training. At first I think that Beech has slipped her into reverse but then realise I can't tell one end from another. It doesn't look in any way like a ship. Painted bright white to merge with the featureless sea, hiding its cranes, drills and rigs under jagged, white, profile-reducing shards, it looks like a 2000 foot long iceberg.

The remaining escorts keep their distance from it, appearing to be afraid. In seventeen hours it will swing back around the Sound and pick us up. It amazes me that they can steer it at all.

One frigate stays with us, to protect our training and act as a dummy target for Jorgen. It deploys RO subs to test us.

We get started. The pen floodlights come on so I can see what we're doing. Funny, it being lighter under the surface than above.

At first Jorgen ignores me, completely overstimulated. He is overwhelmed by new sensations and swims at terrific speed. His path is erratic, his movements strange. For a second I worry he's going to have an episode like his dead brothers had, but he stays with me.

I reassure myself that he's just exercising and let him swim. I pass the time reading a book I found on the ship, and swig at some ship rum I liberated.

After six or seven hours, Jorgen begins to register my presence. I get back to work, but as I feared he seems to have for-



gotten all the training we did back in Ilulissat. I replicate my command signals with the sub's manipulators, but he doesn't seem to recognise them. He just slowly swims around, gazing in through the porthole, wondering why I'm stuck in here being so unplayful.

Then, as if he's decided I've been bothered enough, he starts following orders. I give him the *prepare* signal and he manoeuvres himself into a prone position before *Julie*, allowing me to fix the dummy weapon to his back. I cheer and scream and bang the porthole in delight as I become the overstimulated one.

I can't stop smiling the rest of our session. Jorgen is suddenly working perfectly. Perhaps he is a little slow. The friendly RO subs manage to get in his way and disorientate him. A couple of times they get into possible kill positions. He needs to build up more speed on the approach if he's going to make it against a hostile fleet.

Still, we can work on that tomorrow. All in all he has exceeded expectations after being stuck in the tank for so long. I can report honestly to Beech that we're ahead of schedule. I look at him roll and tumble around *Julie*. He looks back at me.

*You are going to make a noble sacrifice.*

#### 74° North, Lancaster Sound, Day 16

I am invited to watch the execution. The two crewmen are being led to a gangplank. They've actually built a gangplank. The tarps on the gyrocopters thrash violently in the Arctic gale, a sound like sporadic gunfire.

The chief rigger appears at my side. "Happy?"

"They shouldn't have gone anywhere near Jorgen," I say.

"Well, people won't mess with you now."

I look around and see the looks I'm getting from a few hundred hunched and shivering crew. It kind of makes me miss the leering.

Beech is standing by the condemned men. He has a megaphone. "You all want to know why we're here," he says. "We're here because we're at war. These men are guilty of sabotage. It's as simple as that."

Snow whips across the deck, concealing the eyes staring back at him. Sabotage is a strong word for getting drunk and pouring ship rum into Jorgen's tank. I reported them because I was scared. I didn't want to be the one going for a swim if something went wrong with my weapon.

One of the condemned men grabs his marine guard and begins to sob and screech. The marine doesn't know what to do. Beech marches over, punches the man in the face, lifts him up and tosses him over the side. Then he walks to the second man and mumbles something that I can't hear in the howling wind. The man looks away and nods meekly. He's guided onto the plank. He waves and jumps right off.

Beech says a few more encouraging words and orders the men below deck. Most look up at the fading light in the sky and file in. Beech nods at me as he passes.

I spend a few minutes by Jorgen's tank. He swims around and stares at me with a pale eye.

*You are going to make a noble sacrifice.*

#### 74° North, Lancaster Sound, Day 17

We are practising his reconnoitre function, a camera tied to his head. I give him the signal and he swims off, on cue. He is supposed to get within fifty metres of the frigate hull before the camera activates and displays the target on *Julie's* screen. But it doesn't happen. He has gone.

Even with the floodlights on I can't find him. He shouldn't dive any deeper than 100 metres, and it would be downright outlandish for him to go any deeper than 150, but that's what must have happened. He's gone under the training pen and escaped.

I've lost him.

I wait the full seven hours that remain of our practise session, rigid and wide eyed with cold fear, hoping for a signal from his beacon. Nothing happens.

I manage to overcome my incapacitating terror enough to activate the radio and report to the frigate captain. He immediately suggests that we cover it up. We will have to act as if nothing has happened, then pray Jorgen turns up for tomorrow's training. I try to explain how doubtful that is and he uses some harsh dock language. He is in just as much trouble as me.

The icebreaker returns from its surveying and we go back on board, neglecting to mention that we have mislaid our only weapon.

I go below deck, buy a bottle of ship rum from the bar and return to my quarters. I sit there and drink it with my back to the door, waiting for the marines to kick it in. My hands quake so much I can barely hold the bottle.

I drink and drink, then lie down on the floor, unable to stop these convulsive shivers.

I hate Jorgen. I hate him. How could he do this to me?

Energy comes from somewhere. I get up and leave my cabin, staggering through the cramped, dark gangways, my hood up to prevent the attentions of the drunk, stinking sailors.

I knock on the door. The chief rigger appears, holding a half-empty bottle. "Well, well."

I push past him into the cabin.

#### 7° North, Baffin Bay, Day 19

"I should make an example of you." Beech's voice is as toneless as ever.

"I realise you're angry, sir, but that doesn't change what I'm saying. This is a unique opportunity. We can win the battle without any need for nukes."

Beech chews a little harder. His white fingers clasp the pistol in its holster, but he hesitates.

"What do you make of this?"

The chief rigger, Paul, doesn't look at me.

"Well, she's not wrong. Her creature's reconnaissance indicates that the enemy icebreakers have bunched together in an effort to fill up from the one well head. It's an incredibly risky tactic – dangerous enough in peacetime – but I suppose after all our failed attacks they think it's worth the chance to recover the oil quickly. They're as thirsty as we are. An attack on that well head would wipe out their fleet, I'm certain."

"And it wouldn't destroy the well?"

"It would be badly damaged but I think we'd have some breathing space to effect repairs. It's certainly preferable to the nuclear option – but we have to act quickly. They will be fin-



ished drilling soon. Once they've filled up they'll fan out again and we'll have missed our chance."

Beech is itching to carry out an execution, but I can see he's conflicted. Half the crew would like to see me killed in revenge for the gangplank incident, but the marines want to win and go home. They know the nuclear option poses serious risks. Beech can feel them watching him.

Thank God for Jorgen. Nine hours into the last training day, sitting in *Julie*, I was seriously considering making a break for it. Then the beacon sounded and he was back, speckled with oil, a camera full of intelligence strapped to his head.

He has located the enemy fleet, drilling in the Foxe Basin. He has given us a real chance.

"OK," says Beech. "Let's do it."

### 76° North, Baffin Bay, Day 20

I am packed into *Julie* and Jorgen is placed in his sling. The two gyrocopters power up and lift off, looking like hovering pigs with their fat fuselages, snout radomes and quadruped landing gear. We fly low, skimming the dark sea, the occasional iceberg ghosting out of the gloom and fading again.

When we are close enough we're lowered into the water. They drop Jorgen like a depth charge and for a moment I think they've killed him. Then, as *Julie* is lowered, I see his shadow bob up to the surface, circling the sub, waiting for commands. The gyrocopters move away.

I signal *follow* and dive. He ploughs down next to me, swimming alongside, occasionally surfacing. It's a long trip, as Beech insisted we travel a good way on our own.

It takes a few hours to reach the ready point. I turn on *Julie's* lights and there is Jorgen, swimming in a storm of reflecting particles. He shows me his head camera and I run a few tests. It's operating well. He stares at me with his great white eye.

*You are going to make a great sacrifice.*

I give him the *reconnoitre* signal and instantly Jorgen swims away, out of the floodlights. I kill the power and the sea returns to darkness. I take the sub down to avoid rogue ice and drones. I sit in the dark and sip at the rum.

### 80° North, Nares Strait, Day 20

There is no word from him. He should have reached the ship by now. I should be watching a live feed from his camera but there is nothing.

I sit there in *Julie's* cold interior and consider. It only takes a moment to realise that I can't simply abort the mission. I will have to go after him. Anything might have happened.

I engage the sub's engines and move off. *Julie* is small and covered in acoustic tiles and not easy to spot. It's dangerous but I should be able to get fairly near the enemy drill site. Maybe I can figure out what went wrong.

It takes me an hour to find the net. The enemy fleet has deployed a vast cargo net, many times bigger than Jorgen's training pen. It is barbed and baited with tuna. It's a shock to find them this well prepared – they are obviously ready for a sea mammal attack, but expect dolphins. I take a risk and activate my passive sonar, listening for the tracking call of Jorgen's beacon.

Nothing. There is a huge amount of interference. The drilling

is churning up the sea bed, scrambling every signal.

I take *Julie* down, searching for the lower rim of the net, eventually finding the edge. It's 200 metres deep. Very unlikely that Jorgen will have got through, but then he was determined enough to escape the training pen. I reason he's either died trying to get under it or been hooked on the net somewhere.

I rise up inside the net. I'm in RO sub territory now, but with all this drilling going on they won't find me unless they swim right into me. And I have to know if Jorgen is still alive. The churning mud and oil fluids could have knocked his camera out or confused him. He may be trapped or disoriented.

I have lifted to a depth of 100 metres when the beacon starts to chirp. It's coming from outside the net, very close. I turn *Julie* and hit one of the smaller floodlights. Jorgen looks at me through the net.

I signal: *follow*.

But he only hangs there, staring back at me with his bright white eye. I signal again and again but he doesn't respond.

Anger overwhelms me. I hate him more than anything in this whole stinking sea. I punch *Julie's* metal walls and howl insults at him, but he doesn't seem to mind.

An RO sub drops between us, on my side of the net. It looks harmless enough until a small but extremely sharp drill appears from its carapace and activates. The RO attaches itself to *Julie's* left manipulator and starts drilling though the hydraulics. I manage to swat it away with the right manipulator, but it is back again in a flash, this time going for the porthole. I flick it away again, just in time to see a second RO, and then a third, strapping themselves to the hull.

There's no choice now. I signal Jorgen: *go* – and activate one of the two warheads, pulling it out of its sling and extending it before me on the right manipulator. I begin turning the sub. The second RO drills a hole in *Julie's* auxiliary tank and the third kills a propeller.

I gun the engines and head for the main drill site. You can't really miss it, even in the pitch black sea. A fourth RO has begun drilling on the right manipulator but isn't going for the warhead.

I can make out the hull of an enemy breaker, the drilling riser plunging into the depths. I head right for it, thinking how awful it would be for the ROs to stop me now when I am so close.

I'm not angry at Jorgen anymore. This has only ever been a game to him. A confusing, meaningless game. He was never going to risk his life for it. At least, not knowingly.

I picture his bright white eye.

*You are going to make a great sacrifice.*

Ten metres from the hull, the porthole glass is cracking and *Julie's* left manipulator is sheared clean off.

I take a hit on the rum and sigh.

I imagine the fireball from the explosion, rising up like a brief sun over great, bright billows in the middle of the Arctic night. At least it might cheer up the crew.

Heat and light are at a premium. You take them where you can.

Jon Wallace lives in Muswell Hill. Other than writing, his hobbies include watching the cricket and listening to his girlfriend sing. You can read more of his work at [thingaboutchickens.blogspot.com](http://thingaboutchickens.blogspot.com).



# GARETH L. POWELL

• ELEVEN

## PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

**G**ary and Carl sat at their desks, hunched in front of bright flatscreen displays, some room at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Dusk had fallen over the hills beyond the windows, and the only sound in the room was the occasional *snick* of a key being tapped.

Each keystroke controlled the movements of a mechanical rover some hundred million kilometres away, on the lip of a Martian crater. As per the schedule, the rover's cameras were focussed on a rock with the designation H/4356a; a boulder about the size of a small Volkswagen, resting in the sand close to the crater's edge. Interesting weathering patterns had been noted around the stone's lower flanks, and this evening, Gary's task was to get a few good close-up shots of them.

Every tap of his keyboard nudged the rover forward another few centimetres. The time lag made the process laborious. With Mars at this distance from the Earth, it took each of his instructions five and half minutes to crawl across the solar system, and another five and a half for the rover's acknowledgement to reach him, leaving a gap of just over eleven minutes between each command.

He looked across at Carl.

"Enjoying those?"

Carl looked up from his noodles, fork poised halfway to his mouth. He was reading a magazine that lay spread open on his desk.

"Want some?" He proffered the cardboard container. Gary shook his head. He couldn't eat noodles without thinking of maggots. He had the same problem with spaghetti and rice, which maybe explained why he was thirty pounds lighter than Carl.

"No thanks."

Gary preferred to make his own soups. He liked the sim-



# MINUTES

plicity of it. All you had to do was boil some vegetables in a saucepan, add some stock, and when it was ready, stick it all in a blender. What could be more nutritious? His soups kept him nourished and hydrated, and they were an easy way to ensure he ingested his recommended daily intake of fresh vegetables. He made up a big batch each Sunday and that saw him right through the week. In his bag today, he had a flask of chicken and sweet potato.

"Hey," he said. "I thought I'd stop by the gym later, on the way home."

Carl just looked at him, eyes blank with indifference, spreading gut pushed tight against an oversized belt buckle. Then he went back to his magazine. It was a popular science periodical and the headline read *Amazing Alternate Worlds*. The cover featured a painting of Nazi swastikas adorning the Great Pyramid at Giza.

"Do you believe in all that?" Gary asked.

Carl frowned. "Huh?"

Gary waved his hand at the magazine. "All that alternate reality crap?"

Carl took a forkful of noodles and chewed them slowly before swallowing.

"I guess."

Gary smiled mischievously. "So you think there's an endless number of Carls out there in the universe, all playing out every possible version of your life?"

Carl gave him a weary look. "That's the theory."

Gary scratched his ear. "Do you think any of *them* are going to the gym tonight?"

Carl sighed. "You're a dick." He turned away and scooped another forkful into his mouth.

After a moment, Gary shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Gary looked at the image relayed from the Martian desert. As instructed, the rover had moved another wheel rotation closer to H/4365a; but now there was something wrong with the picture, and it took him a moment to spot what it was. He frowned.

"Hey, Carl, come and have a look at this."

Carl dropped his fork into the noodle container. "What now?"

Gary pointed to the screen. "This shadow."

Carl huffed. He wheeled his chair laboriously over to Gary's work station and looked at the screen over the top of his glasses. "What about it?"

"It wasn't there a moment ago."

Carl smacked his lips together. "What's making it?"

Gary shrugged. "I don't know. That's the edge of the crater over there. There shouldn't *be* anything there capable of throwing a shadow."

"Is it the rover?"

"No, the sun's at the wrong angle."

"Hmm." Noodles now forgotten, Carl scooted back to his own computer and started tapping on the keypad. "I'm going to try bringing the camera around," he said.

While he typed, Gary leaned close to his own screen, trying to squint out more detail. The images were rough and of low resolution; the high res stuff got downloaded at a much slower rate. "What do you think it is?"

Carl entered a final command, hit the return key and looked around, the roll of bristled fat at the back of his neck bunched up like a scarf. "Could be a rockslide or a dust devil, I guess." He pushed himself to his feet. "Look, I'm going for a soda. Do you want one?"

Gary shook his head. He was too busy trying to work out



what could be throwing this unexpected shadow.

*If only I could be there, he thought. I could just turn my head...*

Carl lumbered out to the vending machine in the corridor and Gary heard coins clatter into the mechanism, followed by the thump of a can being dispensed.

"It's probably nothing," Carl called.

"Yeah, I know. I just want to see what it is."

Gary checked his watch. Three minutes had passed since Carl instructed the camera to turn in the direction of the crater. It would be at least another eight minutes before they got an image.

He watched as Carl came back and flopped down on his seat.

"You really should think about taking some exercise, man. It would do you the world of good."

Carl popped the tab on the top of his soda. "Don't you start. I get enough of that from my wife."

Gary blinked in surprise. "You're married?"

"Is that so hard to believe?"

"No. Uh. It's just you never mention her. I didn't realise -"

"Do you have a girlfriend, Gary?"

"No, not right now."

"You gay?"

"Uh, no."

"You see, there's plenty I don't know about you either." Carl lowered his voice conspiratorially. "But you know why that is, don't you?"

Gary leaned forward. "No, why?"

Carl licked his fat, wet lips. "Because I know when to mind my own damn business."

**The next five** minutes passed in uncomfortable silence. Across the room, Carl hunched over his keyboard, shoulders tense. The back of his ears were bright red.

To pass the time, Gary pulled out his cell phone and Tweeted *Carl's an asshole*.

A minute later, Carl replied, calling him a retard. And then Debbie their supervisor came online from her office upstairs telling them both to cool it.

Her Tweet read: *Don't make me come down there, boys.*

Gary laughed and put down his phone. The data from Mars had started to come in. The picture built a strip at a time, starting with the sky. By the time it was almost fully downloaded, he could see a view across the crater, towards the rusty dunes in the distance, and the small sun perched in the pale sky.

"Not far enough," he said aloud. There was no sign of anything big enough to have thrown the shadow he had seen in the last picture.

Carl grunted.

With a sigh, Gary settled back. It would take another five and a half minutes to tell the camera to keep turning, and then the same amount of time to receive the next image. He rested his chin on his fist and watched the final stripe add itself to the bottom of the picture.

Then he stopped breathing.

"Carl?" he said in a very small voice. "Carl, tell me that isn't what I think it is."

The big man turned. He still looked angry. He wheeled across. "Where?"

"Bottom left."

Carl pulled off his glasses and leaned close to the screen. When he sat back up, all the colour had drained from his face. "I ain't saying nothing. Not a goddamn thing."

"But it's a boot -"

"We don't know that."

Gary pointed to the toe section protruding into the image. It was covered in a white material, scuffed and stained pink with Martian dust. Thick treads were visible on the sole. "Sure we do. Look at it. It's a boot. What the hell else could it be?"

He looked at Carl. The older man's face had taken on the sweaty grey pallor of a man in a hostage video.

"The camera's still moving," Carl said. "We should get another picture in eleven minutes." He picked up the phone. "Don't do or say anything until I get Debbie down here. Are you still logged in to Twitter?"

Gary checked his cell phone. "Uh, yeah."

"Log out, *right now*."

**By the time** Debbie Knox walked into the room, the next image has begun to assemble itself, strip by strip, on Gary's monitor. "What's this all about?" she asked.

Carl handed her a printout. "Gary thinks he's found a foot."

"A foot?"

Debbie was a middle-aged woman with an unruly mass of greying hair swept back in a loose ponytail. She wore a thick knitted cardigan over her white blouse and blue jeans.

Carl tapped the paper for her. "Right here."

Debbie held the paper up to her face, almost touching her nose. "This thing here?" She frowned at the image, turning the paper this way and that, trying to make sense of it.

Gary cleared his throat. "Yes."

Debbie's tongue clicked against her teeth. She let the arm holding the printout drop to her side.

"It does look like a boot, I grant you. But it isn't. It can't be, can it?" She handed the piece of paper back to Carl. "It must be part of the rover itself. It must have come loose. In which case, we could be looking at some catastrophic damage scenarios."

"I told you, didn't I?" Carl touched his hand to his forehead, finger and thumb extended into an L-shape. "Loser."

Gary flipped him the bird.

"Hey!" Debbie stepped between them. "We don't have time for your squabbles right now. We need to trace the location of this damage and we need to -"

She stopped talking and stared at Gary's monitor. "What's that?"

Gary swivelled in his chair. The computer had finished downloading the final image from the Martian surface. For a moment, his eyes refused to make sense of the picture, seeing only peculiar shadows and random blobs of colour. Then it all snapped into place.

"Holy crap."

Without taking his eyes from the screen, he got to his feet. His chair slithered away on its casters. To his left, Carl stood with his fat mouth hanging open, expressions of indignation and bafflement chasing each other across his face.

"Is this some kind of trick?" Debbie said. "Is that Photo-shopped?"



Gary swallowed. "No ma'am."

He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. When his sight cleared, the image on the screen remained.

An apparition stood on the crater's rim, partially back-lit by the small sun dipping low in the pale Martian sky: the figure of a woman in a tight-fitting elasticised suit, head sheathed in an ornate brass helmet with small circular windows at the front and sides. She looked like a Victorian diver. An air hose protruded from the top of her helmet and rose behind her, to the open hatch of a baroque airship hanging in the thin air above the crater. Lights burned in its gondola windows. Smoke issued from its chimneys. Its huge impellers looked like windmills against the sky.

The woman had one gauntleted hand raised in greeting. She held the other at waist height, clutching a bright rectangle of cloth.

"It's a flag," Carl said, voice flat with shock.

Gary shook his head, but there could be no mistake. This woman in the outlandish suit – this impossible woman waving at them from the surface of Mars – held a flag.

And not just any flag.

"It's the Union Jack."

Carl coughed. He scratched the loose roll of skin beneath his jaw. "Um, actually, it's only called that if it's being flown from the deck of a ship," he said, falling back on the pedantic habits of a lifetime, "on land, it's known as the Union Flag."

"Shut the fuck up, Carl."

Gary noticed the same flag painted on the canvas bow of the airship. The overlapping red, white and blue circles of the Royal Air Force were emblazoned on the fins at its rear. He felt Debbie step up beside him. She took his hand, and her fingers felt cold.

"I don't understand," she said.

Gary didn't answer. He had no idea what to say. The UK didn't even have a manned space programme. Outside the building, he could see the lights of Pasadena reflected on the night sky. A helicopter blinked red and green above the free-way. It all looked reassuringly quiet and real: just another week night in California. There was no way the British could have beaten them to Mars. Not with technology that looked as if it had been cannibalised from a museum.

Not in this universe...

Gary glanced across at the magazine still resting on Carl's desk. *Amazing Alternate Worlds*. Feeling cold inside, he turned his attention back to the screen, and looked at the British woman's raised hand. Silhouetted against the sky, three of her gloved fingers were bent, but the index finger and thumb were thrust out in a proud and unmistakable message.

*Losers.*

This is Gareth's fourth appearance in *Interzone*. His short story 'Ack-Ack Macaque' came top in the 2007 *Interzone* Readers' Poll. His second novel, *The Recollection*, will be published by Solaris Books in September 2011. You can find his website at [www.garethlpowell.com](http://www.garethlpowell.com).

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of





# AL ROBERTSON

# dawn

**The coffin was closed when Sarah went to say goodbye to her brother.**

Before she could even think about asking, the funeral director had touched her hand, and said, "Of course, it would be better to remember him...as he was". Insurgents had taken advantage of a traffic jam to attack Peter's convoy. Fire had taken his jeep before he could escape, flaying the life from him.

A bus rumbled past outside, and the floor shook gently. For a moment, she imagined a god passing by – a drift of shadow that might have been wings; a soul borne away, to cross a dark river. She was sure that Peter could have found a poem in the moment – fragmented and confusing, as all his recent work had been, but real. Loss filled the space where jealousy would once have flared.

The funeral director had missed a patch of stubble while shaving that morning. He tried to smile sadly, but his eyes showed nothing beyond professional detachment.

"Thank you," she said. "Maybe it would be best."

And then he left her, and she was alone. The drizzle greyed the light at the window. Even the hard colours of the Union Jack that covered the coffin were muted.

It was the same at the funeral. Soft rain drifted across Parliament Square. Grey traffic clogged the roundabout. One of the traffic lights had broken. A red man would not turn to green; a green light would not change to red. Horns protested, echoing off the mud-coloured walls of the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey.

Before Sarah went into St Margaret's Church, nerving herself to see Aunt Veronica and the others, she stopped to look around. Church and state; and, over at the edge of the square, an off-white banner, flapping in the wind, that read 'Peace'. It seemed very far away. She turned again, and St Margaret's took her. It was cold inside, and she barely knew anyone. Nobody had asked her to play, which was a relief. She hadn't touched her violin for eighteen months.

She'd last seen Peter two years ago. They had tried to talk over a meal in a small Italian restaurant in Brixton. "I should come to your place," he had said. "Make it easy for you. Least I can do." There had been apology in his voice. But she wouldn't let him. He had already told her that he was transferring out of the Devon and Dor-



sets; that he would shortly be leaving for Kuwait, and then perhaps invasion. He was tall, and fit, and his voice slipped easily into loudness. He would quickly imprint himself on her flat, and remain present, long after leaving. Memories of her mother, once a frequent visitor, already permeated her home. She could not stand for him to die, and then suffuse her days and her dreams too.

"I'm sorry. It's been too long," he said.

"Seven months," she replied, immediately regretting her precision. "And now – you're off again."

"A bit further than Armagh, this time." He tried to smile. "But I'll be fine." And then, the argument had begun.

Sitting in the cold church, listening to the priest drone, she wondered how many others who'd been close to soldiers had, over the centuries, felt the same regret. She had been angry with his absorption in camp life in Warminster, and then furious that he had left it, to – it seemed to her – leap so decisively towards death. And so her final memories of him were of hot anger, and tears, and of rich food that tasted of ash.

After the argument, there had been a few embarrassed emails. She had sent birthday cards, and terse congratulations when a small but prestigious poetry press had offered to publish his first collection, but they had not met up when he returned home on leave. Aunt Veronica would always let her know the dates, but Sarah never emailed him, and he never got in touch with her. She half hoped that she would bump into him, as she scurried between Warren Street tube and the small legal college where she worked, or that he might be waiting for her one night outside her Camberwell flat. But he was never there, never anywhere where she might find him again.

Now that he was dead, he seemed more present. Every few hours, she would see him in a stranger. The shift of a shoulder, a certain firm way of walking, a sharp voice ordering pints in a pub – for a moment, each one would flare with a sense of his presence, and become a ghost, and then – as she looked back again, amazed, thrilling suddenly, forgetting; the ghost would melt again into flesh, and if she was lucky she would not catch the eye of the stranger she found herself staring at.

The days danced by like flames. Aunt Veronica left a message on her answerphone. "Do come to Salisbury for a few days, dear. I know it must be hard." They had barely spoken at the church. The sympathy and near-warmth in those few words surprised her. She did not return the call. It was harder and harder to get out of bed. A letter came about Peter's life insurance. Sarah could not read it for weeping. Lunch breaks devoured the afternoon. The list of emails to respond to grew daily. It was easier to ignore them. Calls from friends went unanswered. Her regular lunches with Debbie fell away.

"All this with your brother – we're so sorry, but..."

The legal college called it compassionate leave, but she knew that she would be quickly replaced with a temp. Soon, they would not even remember her. She had arrived, she had said, between orchestras. She had never wondered whose place she was filling – who had moved on from the small office, the dirty keyboard, and the photocopier that wheezed and spluttered like a heavy smoker. There had been another

round of failed auditions, and then she had realised that it was easier to just stay on there. She wouldn't have to fall back on any of the investments her mother had left; wouldn't have to let the family know how badly she had failed.

Peter's poetry collection had come out about then, surprising and confusing her. It had been well received. There had been a significant article in the *London Review of Books*. Peter had been called the first of the twenty first century war poets. The reviewer had compared him to David Jones and Paul Celan. Neither of these names meant anything to her. She had set the book down unfinished, and not returned to it.

Now, she picked it up again, and found herself obsessed with it. Its broken style mirrored her sense of the world. Words would knit together and she would suddenly hear his voice. These poems held so much more of his presence than the pretenders she saw in the streets. But she found it frustratingly difficult to pin down any final meanings. Images and characters rang repetitively through the book, but she could not make them cohere.

Peter returned obsessively to early twentieth century composer Michael Kingfisher, to the aftermath of warfare in the former Yugoslavia, to Salisbury Plain and the deserted village of Parr Hinton; to images of a skinless man, walking through the nearby woods, at once leading him into knowledge and foreshadowing his own future. "An angel satyr walks these hills," Peter had said, quoting Kingfisher. Sarah shuddered whenever she encountered the creature, and would flick rapidly past the precise, bloody words that described it, wishing for the comforting abstraction of music.

One particular poem hooked her, and called her back, again and again. It was, she began to realise, an elegy for childhood. It took her many readings to piece together its broken syntax, and understand the subtle, ambiguous references that it encoded. When she did so, recognition burned in her, directly triggering memories.

The poem was set in 1982. She had been five, Peter eight. The family was overnighing at a friend's quarters. Slurred, too loud adult singing from downstairs had woken them both. There was a television in their room. Peter had tip-toed to it, and looked back at her.

"Should I?"

A moment, and then she nodded, too stunned by his daring to speak. He had climbed back into his bed, and she had scrambled across to join him. The Open University logo shone on-screen, jewelled with the thrill of the forbidden, and then a title card announced the next programme as 'Music and Landscape, Unit 10: Michael Kingfisher'.

Then, rich music and numinous images blazed out around them. Sarah could only ever remember fragments of the documentary. The dense, muddy greens of Salisbury Plain, the softer greens and browns of the Dorset countryside, shuddered out of the television as music exploded into the room. Some of it reminded her of the classical pieces that she already started to know. Some was indescribable – strange electronic inventions, sounds that danced out of sine waves and binary code. A flute spun melodies across it all, shaping difference into one enchanted whole.



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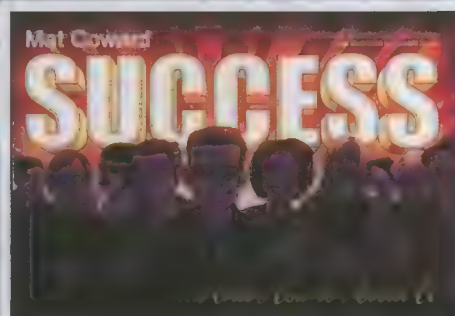
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INTERZONE #235 (JULY–AUGUST 2011)









Running through the music were hissing moments of recorded sound that felt truly ancient – old men's voices, softened by cider, singing incomprehensible words; the pattering thud of little drums, flitting around notes scratched from fiddles and accordions; a deep and indescribable roaring, that felt like the sound of the earth, singing to itself. Every so often a cultured voice would interrupt, intoning facts about Kingfisher's life with all the impassioned detachment of a priest overseeing a ritual.

Verdancy suffused the television screen as the programme built to a climax. The camera explored ash-grey Stonehenge. Red ribbons shook and bells jangled as six men danced together. Sunset blazed through trees, a fire in the deep woods. Tumuli humped like whales in the green. Between each shot, colour bloomed across the screen like so much spilt paint.

At the last, the music died to a soft, liquid piping. There was a cloister, partially tumbled by the trees that had grown up within it; there were houses without windows or roofs, looking like they had been built from cardboard. A small medieval church shuddered into view, and then vanished. A gravestone appeared, embedded in soft, emerald gloom. A red hand held something like a flute, bright against the green. Then, the pipes died, and there was silence.

Credits rolled, black on white, and the Open University logo appeared again. Soon afterwards, a man with a moustache and thick-framed spectacles was talking about mathematics.

"That..." said Peter.

"Oh yes," said Sarah.

The next day, Peter wrote his first poem, puzzling his hung-over parents. Sarah was soon asking for, and then thrilling at, violin lessons.

All of that was encoded in the adult Peter's writing. He made those few minutes the last safe moment. A few days later, they had both been returned to their respective boarding schools, each proud not to cry as their parents left them. A couple of months had passed, and then their father was shot in the head and killed by a terrified Argentinian squad-leader.

The poem touched and intrigued Sarah. She had hardly thought of that night for years. She had occasionally asked her music teachers about Kingfisher; they had always dismissed him as at best an eccentric, at worst an idiot, and so he had slipped from her mind. Now, she Googled him.

There was a reasonably detailed biography on Wikipedia. His musical career had been triggered by the first performance of Vaughan Williams' *Tallis Fantasia* in 1910. He had spent three pre-war summers walking the land, collecting folk songs and composing his own music. The first excursions had been south of Oxford, around Belbury and Edgestow; most had been in Wiltshire, Somerset and Dorset, following the old green tracks between hill forts and tumuli. They had been centred on Parr Hinton – then, a thriving village, deep in Salisbury Plain. The woods that surrounded it had become a sacred place for Kingfisher.

She jumped out of the entry to an article about Parr Hinton. It had been abandoned in 1943, when the military had requisitioned it for training purposes. Photographs showed

broken, roofless houses. The church seemed well preserved. The steep-sided Mercy's Hill, dense with trees, loomed over the village. There was a bald patch on top of it where a stone circle stood, boring a hole in time. Kingfisher had fled there in 1916, after he had been invalided home. He had composed his *Parr Hinton Fragments*, and then apparently disappeared.

Another Wikipedia article discussed the *Fragments*. It began by describing them – a series of sketches for soloist, quartet, or full orchestra, running between three and ten minutes long, to be performed in an order chosen by drawing cards. It touched on the wax cylinders – field recordings of rural singers, made by Kingfisher in the summers before the war. They were to be played as part of the performance, their order and placing determined by rolling two dice.

A brief critical note was apparently sympathetic, but in fact dismissive. The work was too unstructured to have ever been performed; its fragmented structure was a sad result of shellshock; the famous Tarot quote demonstrated the extent to which Kingfisher's occult interests had corrupted his talent. The quote was given in full, pulled from one of his 1913 diary entries:

*Cards pulled at random hook deep truths; fragments hint at a whole, fluid and vast, always streaming by, impossible to grasp. I dream of a music as fresh as these old images always are; as this old world is, renewed each time my floating self perceives it.*

This led to a discussion of Marsyas. Kingfisher had seen the myths surrounding the Greek satyr as directly relevant to his music. But Marsyas had been flayed alive by Apollo, and so Sarah winced and skipped over the rest of the paragraph. The article finished by noting that Kingfisher's wax cylinders had been lost sometime before the Second World War. There was now no way for the *Parr Hinton Fragments* to be played according to his original instructions.

Pain flared in Sarah's lower back. She had been sitting at her desk for too long. A low static hiss told her of rain. Looking away from the screen, she was surprised to see that it was nearly three am. She stood up, and stretched. A sound snatched at her. It could have been a distant siren, fading out; it could have been someone whistling, out in the street. She went to the window.

There was a figure – something like a man – standing on the other side of the road, not quite in the light. She started as she saw that the creature was naked; that where there should have been skin, there was only a deep, clotted red. It was holding something white up to its mouth. Remembering the thin, high sound she had just heard, she imagined pipes, or perhaps a flute. She took a step back, suddenly afraid that she would attract its attention.

It moved, stepping towards the light, the white still at its mouth. She held her breath, but could not stop looking. Her imagination was filled with a sense of Peter, as he had been at the last. A failure to have seen is no barrier to vision. As the creature reached the streetlights, she saw that it had a shimmer to it. She had been expecting something ragged and burned, but to her surprise its flesh shone, as if it had



been carved from red amber and then studded with so many rubies.

And then she took a step forwards, and was breathing again, for as the figure stepped fully into the light it revealed itself to be a man in a red tracksuit made slick by the rain, smoking a pale cigarette.

She realised that she couldn't remember how many days she had been up for. She went to bed, and let herself sleep. There were no dreams. When she woke up, it was about ten in the morning. She couldn't tell how long she had slept for; if only for a few hours, or for an entire day and another night. There was no food left in her cupboards. Her fridge was empty of all but a small container of spoiled milk, and a sad-looking onion.

There was another message from Aunt Veronica on the answerphone. This time, Sarah did return the call. Her Aunt's fussy concern broke over her like a cool spring, and she agreed to take the train down to Salisbury the next day.

**The teabags had** not been given enough time to steep. The lemon cake had a tart meanness to it. "Such a shame not to have a man to look after you, dear," said Aunt Veronica. Sarah had been in her house for half an hour, and was already plotting ways she could leave.

"But then, that's your choice."

The sun had pulled itself behind a cloud, as if scared that – if caught in the dusty room – it too would be offered a cup full of pale liquid, and would have to chew politely on dry bitterness, mumbling the occasional platitude to keep the conversation going.

"And how is your cello playing?"

"Violin, Aunt."

"That's what I meant."

"I play," said Sarah. "I teach."

"Well, someone has to. It's very lucky that you don't really need to work, isn't it? Though I'm not sure it's what your mother meant for you."

Sarah couldn't face an argument. A clock counted out the seconds. Veronica seemed to have squeezed out her entire stock of conversation. Sarah took another sip of tea, and winced.

"I was thinking of getting out for a bit," she said.

"Well, I'm always happy to walk into town, dear."

"Maybe a drive, perhaps."

"I couldn't take you too far. It would give me one of my heads."

"I thought I might just – borrow your car."

Aunt Veronica pursed her lips, pushing them together so hard that all colour left them. "Oh."

Sarah had said that she would stay for a few days. She couldn't just leave. She felt the possibility of any sort of escape receding. She reached desperately for somewhere to flee to.

"There's somewhere – very special to Peter. I'd like to go there – just me, and remember him."

Veronica's lips decompressed a little.

"And where is this place?" she said.

"Parr Hinton. On the plain."

"Oh."

Veronica reached forward, and poured herself another cup of tea. She did the same for Sarah. Sarah restrained herself from trying to stop her.

"I don't know the name."

"I would love you to come, Aunt. But – it would be fearfully dull for you. And I do so want to just be there, alone, with him."

Veronica nodded, once, and then took her tarnished knife in hand, and went to start cutting at the remains of the cake.

"I'll see what I can do about the insurance, dear," she said.

**First the A36**, and then the B3083; each road nestling through soft, mounded landscapes, fields and pastures and woods touching at their edges. The countryside was all soft, clotted greens and browns; the sky dense with pastel clouds. Every so often the sun would break through, and the landscape – jewelled with water from the recent rain – would shimmer into life, suddenly bright and vibrant. And then, just as suddenly, the clouds would close round it again, and the trees and hills and hedges would lose all sharpness, becoming softly blotted once again.

Sarah was driving to the village of Chitterne. It was on the edge of the military areas of the plain, a few miles from Parr Hinton. She wasn't sure if she'd push on beyond it. She assumed that she would be happy with a pub lunch, and maybe a short walk through the fields. And then she would return, driving as slowly as she could, and pretend to Veronica that she'd walked in the past with her memories of Peter. She had his book with her. She could read that, and think of him.

"Parr Hinton?" said the short postmistress. "You can't go there. It's far too dangerous."

Sarah was surprised at how disappointed she felt. "Can you get close to it?" she said.

The woman's face softened, and she touched Sarah's hand with her own. "I am sorry, love," she said. "It's the military."

Sarah sighed. "Well, if it's shut..."

"I'd hate you to have a wasted journey," said the postmistress, suddenly brightening. Sarah remembered the wet fields, shining into life. "You're not a Michael Kingfisher fan?"

"Yes," said Sarah, and then: "How did you know?"

"Well, you're too young to be one of the people who used to live in Parr Hinton! And he's the only other reason people ask about it. If you look over there –" she waved towards a rack of paperbacks "– we've got his books."

"I didn't know he'd written any."

"Oh, then you haven't had a wasted journey!" She beamed, overjoyed on Sarah's behalf. "I'm so glad."

The books were published by a small Glastonbury press. There was a *Songs of Wiltshire*, a *Critical Writings*, and a *Diaries 1911–1913*. Sarah bought all three, and then walked down the small High Street to the King's Head pub. "Very friendly," the Postmistress had said, "and they do a lovely Ploughman's." And she was right.

After lunch, Sarah lost herself in leafing through her new purchases. She started with *Songs of Wiltshire*. The book recorded the music that Kingfisher had found, walking across the county in those long summers before the First World War. She was surprised to see that there were only about six



or seven different songs in the collection. Kingfisher had set down multiple versions of each one, carefully noting the differences between them. She flicked between songs, reading each one and then exploring the footnotes. Some mentioned Parr Hinton. One made her start:

*The words as given here were obtained from Mr Edward Verrall of Parr Hinton, a neighbour of Mr Henry Broadwood, who offered me lunch as I passed through the village early in 1912. The second verse differs from most other versions by replacing the words 'showed his ugly head' with 'skinless and shining red'. I thus take it to be an older variant of the song, referencing the Marsyas myth, which has found a remarkable new life in these parts.*

Sarah remembered the bloody figure who had chased her down to Dorset; the flayed man who haunted Peter's poetry. She put the book of songs down. Her plate had been tidied away. She emptied the last of her white wine, and then settled the bill.

Outside, the wind was dancing through the village, and the clouds had broken into fragments, leaving the sky a soft blue, dappled with white. The threat of rain had lifted, and the world felt fresh and alive. Sarah decided to walk as far as she could towards Parr Hinton.

But the road soon ended in a fence and a low gate. There was a military sign, warning her not to go any further. She thought about going on, but then imagined being stopped by a soldier, and sent back – the military once again coming between her and her brother.

Sadness surprised her for the second time that day, and she turned away. Accepting that for now the way was closed, she walked slowly back to the car, and the long drive back, and the sharp, controlling pain of two more days of Aunt Veronica.

**"I was starting** to get worried about you, Sarah!" said Debbie, shifting her glass of wine in her hand. "You could have texted or something – you know, to let us know you were OK."

"I just had to get through it. Lose myself a bit, I guess. I spent a lot of time trying to understand Peter's book."

"His poetry? What's it like?"

"One of the poems is lovely. I'm not sure about the rest. The critics liked it."

"That book was a surprise. I always thought you were the really creative one."

"So did I."

They talked into the evening. When the bar closed, it felt like hardly any time had passed. They walked each other to the bus stop. Sarah hugged Debbie onto her bus, and watched it recede; a great bright block of warmth and safety, roaring into the night. When Sarah got home, her flat seemed very quiet. Her drinks cupboard held gin and wine. She kicked off her shoes and poured herself a glass of red. The sofa was so soft and warm. She had left her travelling bag just by it. The Kingfisher books peered out. They had saved her from Aunt Veronica.

Kingfisher had written lyrically about the people and landscapes of Dorset and Wiltshire. The *Critical Writings* had gone some way to explaining the repetitive nature of *Songs of Wiltshire*. He had been deeply concerned with improvisation, with personal remaking. *Music should be a supple response to lived experience*, he had written in 1912, *dancing on the moment. To pin songs down into one, final interpretation is a kind of death for them. I think of butterflies, pinned in boxes; skulls, stripped of life, that can only ever show one hard dead face to the world.*

Sarah found herself remembering some of the songs. She tried to sing one of them to herself, but couldn't remember her way past the first line. She pulled *Songs of Wiltshire* out, and – carefully avoiding the introduction, with its invocation of Marsyas – paged through it until she found the song. The melody was simple, tumbling off the stave; the words catchily evoked love, and then loss. She sang the first few lines, enjoying the way her tipsy voice twined round the song. Reaching the end of the first verse, she stopped, suddenly self-conscious. But the wine was at hand, and it was easy to pour another glass.

**Sarah woke with** a start. Pain thumped at her head, vague memories whirling around it. She made herself a coffee, and then tried to reconstruct the night before. She remembered singing, and music, and a slow and rhythmic thumping. There had been people playing with her. She must have been dreaming. Caffeine energised her enough to reach the living room. She was surprised to see her violin lying on the little coffee table, by *Songs of Wiltshire*.

A shard of memory leapt to the front of her mind; shoes tumbling out of the cupboard as she dug around for her violin case. But there had been more than violins playing last night. There had been those others. She remembered a flute, guitars, even drums, but of course that was absurd.

She saw that her laptop was turned on, and went to take a look at it. A rich, vinous smell reeked up and shook her as she passed the empty bottle of wine. The gin bottle was out and open too. Sitting down at her little desk, she saw that she had left several windows open. She paged through them.

Most were different YouTube pages. There was a man alone in his bedroom, singing 'The Farmer's Thorn'; black and white footage of a 60s folk band playing a sitar-driven version of 'T'owd yowe wi' one horn'; morris dancers, all shivering bells and drifting red ribbons, jiggling through 'Long Lankin'; and then many others, each a fresh interpretation of one of those three songs. These digital ghosts must have been her accompanists.

There was also an Amazon page: 'Your order has been accepted'. She had apparently brought a copy of the *Music and Landscape* series on DVD. It had already dispatched. I'll have to send it back when it gets here, she thought. There was a single review: 'The last TV documentaries Natalie Ashton made before she moved to New York. They introduce us to Vaughan Williams, Britten, Warlock and others. Pretty good for 1973, though some of the later programmes get quite abstract. Hey ho, that's Ashton for you – and if you're a fan of her more avant garde stuff from the late 70s, you'll love 'em!



A bargain for lovers of British classical music, too.'

The rest of the day passed slowly. Memories of the night before receded with her hangover, until all was something of a blur. One image stuck in her mind, though, for it had been the last to burn there before she had woken.

A man with a glistening red face had turned towards her and smiled, his eyes alive with sad recognition. For a moment she had forgotten to be afraid, feeling instead something between pity and wonder. And then understanding had crashed in like a misplayed chord, and she had been shocked into wakefulness.

She had thought that the immediate sharpness of her grief for Peter had started to recede. Clearly, she was wrong.

**Over the next** few days, Sarah tried to get out and about as much as possible. If she was at a loose end, she would go and sit in a café, or walk in one or other of London's parks. She took Peter's book with her; she had decided to try and reach a deeper understanding of it, as a kind of private apology to him.

Memories of her trip to Wiltshire, and her drive to Chitterne, combined with her reading of Kingfisher, helped her clarify some new aspects of the book. Peter had engaged obsessively with the countryside around Warminster, following traces of journeys that Kingfisher had made. In particular, he kept on returning to Parr Hinton, pulling words from its empty houses and woods, and from Mercy's Hill.

He had not been absorbed in camp life, she realised, when – in the two years following their mother's death – he had been so distracted, so out of touch. Instead, he had been using all the moments spared to him to lose himself in a deep relationship with that dead musician, and the landscapes they had shared. That relationship had borne fruit in the creation of this endlessly open, endlessly opaque collection of poems.

She saw Debbie again, meeting up with her for lunch. A couple she knew from the legal college had her over for supper. The temp who had replaced her had recently accepted an offer of full time work at the college. Rattling home on the tube, she had a sudden and surprisingly decisive feeling that a chapter in her life had closed. The money from Peter's life insurance cushioned her from any immediate need to either find work, or admit to the family that she needed to draw on her investments. She decided just to let things flow for a while.

There was an Amazon package waiting for her when she got home. She settled down on the sofa to open it. The image on the cover of the DVD set memories flaring in her mind. It was an aerial shot of Stonehenge. She was sure that it came from the Kingfisher documentary. Her childhood suddenly seemed so close.

When the DVD menu came up on her TV, she was surprised to see that there were only nine programmes shown. None of them were about Kingfisher. There was an 'extras' choice. She flicked the cursor to that, and was relieved to see that the Kingfisher documentary was included there. Wondering what kind of glitch had pulled it into this part of the DVD, she sat back, ready to watch.

Words shone out of the screen:

*The music for this film was largely based on Kingfisher's Parr Hinton Fragments. It was arranged and performed by Brian Mayhew, who withdrew all usage rights early in 1982. The documentary shows some of director Natalie Ashton's first experiments with the narrative techniques that she would later build on in her more famous American work. We present it here stripped of its musical accompaniment.*

The documentary played on, silent but for the upper crust voice that Sarah remembered so well. Dry facts about Kingfisher flowed out; images of lush countryside danced by, cut together – Sarah now realised – with an acute and profoundly dynamic visual sensibility – but there was no music, and without music the film was only half complete. The narrator's voice annoyed her, and so she muted the sound. Watching the film to the end, she was pleased to see that its final sequences were as visually powerful as she had remembered.

Over the next few days, the absence of music in the documentary started to nag at her. Sequences of images would pop into her mind, and she would find herself imagining scores to set to them. Sometimes she would draw on melodies that she'd found in *Songs of Wiltshire*. Sometimes, she would imagine synthesised music, and assume that she was remembering the programme's original soundtrack. Sometimes, she found herself dreaming of music that she could play herself. She would find that her fingers were tapping away in time with it, writing chords on the air.

She had put her violin in its case, but she hadn't returned it to the cupboard. It was sitting just by her sofa, surprising her every time she looked at it. She had expected to feel her old self-disgust returning, the sense of deep failure that had come to her when she had stepped back from life as a musician. Instead, an excitement at the possibility of making music for its own sake suffused her, an emotion that she hadn't felt for a long time. One day, returning from a long afternoon spent deep in the green embrace of Hyde Park, she reached down and pulled it out.

She started by playing a few scales, adjusting each string as she did so. At last, the violin sung beneath her fingers, perfectly in tune. She lifted the bow, ready to start playing, and then stopped. She had no music to hand, and she had never felt comfortable with improvisation.

She remembered the *Songs of Wiltshire*. The book was lying on the coffee table, face down. She reached for it, turned to a song at random, propped the book open on the table top, and started to play. The simple melody leapt off her violin and flowed out into the air. There were six verses in the song; she played through them all, whispering the words to herself as she went. The melody was very simple, but it had a deep, implacable catchiness to it. When she stopped playing, it ran on inside her mind, only slowly fading away.

Looking for something fresh, she turned the page, and found the same song again. Remembering Kingfisher's determination to communicate different versions of the songs that he'd recorded, she went through it carefully. The melody



had been lightly shifted at several points. Some of the words had been changed, too, and Kingfisher had also noted that this version of the song was played more slowly and mournfully than most. Sarah was surprised at the extent to which such small changes altered the song, lending it a deep, fresh gravity. On finishing, she turned the page to the next version, and then to the one beyond, playing quickly though each.

As she did so, she started to understand what Kingfisher had been trying to achieve. Each subtle variation was a small lesson in how to take something that already existed, and in small but important ways make it new. Kingfisher sought to teach his readers the art of variation, and through that, improvisation. Realising this, Sarah felt liberated. Rather than turning to the book to find new interpretations of the song, she began to create her own responses to it, playing the simple melody through again and again, altering it a little each time. She stood up, and began to sway with the music that she was making.

As she played, she was reminded of Peter's poetry. Like Kingfisher, perhaps he too sought to not just deploy his own creativity, but to inspire it in his audience. The frustrating gaps in his poems – the missing words, the uncompleted sentences, the only half resolved narratives – could be there, she realised, to provide space for his readers to complete each poem for themselves, in ways entirely personal to them.

She remembered the documentary, and wondered what it would be like to use it as a trigger for improvisation. She put down her violin, cued up the DVD, and hit play. At first, she found it difficult to respond to the on-screen images. She was used to reading music in staves and notes; to find it in moving images and fragmented sentences was a daunting leap. She remembered the song she had just been playing, and let a few random passages shrill out. They seemed to work against Ashton's images. Sarah felt an odd embarrassment, but she kept playing, experimenting with different tunes and tempos.

Soon, she found a music that meshed with Ashton's images. She let the melodies of the folk songs that Kingfisher had collected dance out of her violin. Songs that he had composed began to spin out too, reworked by memory. The fit with Ashton's images became seamless. Jagged noise reflected footage of the trenches. Then, the programme entered its last few minutes, covering Kingfisher's final period – his stay in Craiglockart Hospital, his escape to Parr Hinton, the composition of the *Fragments*.

Images flared across the screen; some of them were familiar to her, some seemed entirely new. There was Stonehenge, and then the low tumuli that surrounded it; there was Silbury Hill, and the stones at Avebury. They seemed to form a kind of visual algebra, a puzzle that demanded completion through sound. Mercy's Hill loomed out again and again. The camera danced through dense green woods. She felt her violin leap under her hand like something living, and her music became part of a chorus.

Of course, it was impossible. The programme had no soundtrack. It seemed that she had played as part of an orchestra, an orchestra combining classical instruments and rough, rural recordings with ferocious electronic noise. There

were words, too, more fluid and evocative than anything the original narrator had said. Old and new musics flowed together, in salute to Kingfisher, and to the landscapes that had so inspired him.

And then there was a sense of presence, too. At first, there was just a scent – something rich and dark and bloody. Then, there was a sound – the thin high piping of a whistle, leading the aural dance that she had become a part of. Something bright was reflected in the television screen, standing just behind her, shifting and flowing in time with the music. She was too focussed on her playing to turn. When the morris men leapt across the screen, the red flutter of their ribbons was a sudden visual rhyme with its dancing image.

The music leapt and soared towards a peak, building up with the soft inevitability of a thunderstorm. But as it did so Sarah felt her playing falter. There was magnificence before her, as vale, and hill, and wood, as tumulus, and standing stone, and henge, as farmer, and priest, and midwife, flew across the screen together – but she felt her grasp on them weaken, and the language she had to respond to them slip away from her. No matter what notes she threw out, her improvised solution to the puzzle that they represented was falling away into incoherence.

There was no-one playing but herself, and her own failed music embarrassed her. She stopped playing, and let violin and bow swing away from each other and down, becoming once again nothing more than dead wood and steel and horsehair. She took a step back, and turned, and for a second there was the ghost of a creature there. It was standing man-like and staring at her, its eyes alive with joy, its rose-petal flesh glowing out – at once so open to the world, and so vulnerable to it.

It let the pipes fall away from its mouth – white teeth flashing against the red – and, fearless at last, she found herself reaching out to it. But there was nothing there to touch and hold on to. Wine-red lights were spinning across the wall as an ambulance passed by outside, its siren wailing succour into the night, and then there was darkness.

Sarah slumped, collapsing onto the sofa. The last few images of the documentary rolled by, and then the titles began but – exhausted – she had fallen into a deep sleep before her head hit the cushion.

That night, her brother's words leapt through her dreams like fire. But at the moment when she thought that she was about to step past his art and touch his living presence, dawn ignited and burnt out the night.

**"If you could be quieter in your flat I'd appreciate it,"** said the neighbour.

"I'm sorry," said Sarah.

"I like music as much as the next person – but it's been twice, now. If you could get a rehearsal room for your band?"

"I'm not in a band, Mrs Ensor. I've heard music too. I think someone's playing their stereo too loud."

"I'm going to talk to the building committee if it happens again."

Sarah had spent the day at the English Folk Song and Dance Society in Camden, consulting the original manuscript of the



*Parr Hinton Fragments*. She retained a deep sense of frustration that she had not been able to match the documentary's final section with appropriate music. She only had confused memories of that first session; subsequent attempts to recapture the intensity of her playing had ended in failure. So, she had decided to seek inspiration in the *Fragments*. She had also found Natalie Ashton's website. There was an email address on it, so Sarah had written to her asking about the documentary's soundtrack. She could find no recent information about Brian Mayhew, or his music.

The manuscript was a remarkable document. Sarah could see why generations of music scholars had been so baffled by – and hence so dismissive of – it. Rather than presenting a finished composition, it challenged its reader to create their own piece, using a range of predefined components. Kingfisher had dedicated it to 'those who are reaped by those who would control'.

Shards of music were presented, to be combined in any order. There were specific instructions concerning Kingfisher's wax cylinders. He advised the use of dice to randomly select individual ones to play, at random points during the performance. Sarah had jotted down some of the work's key themes, but had had to sadly conclude that – without Kingfisher's recordings and a number of supporting musicians – she would be unable to do it justice as a performer.

That evening, she read through Peter's book again. She was finding it much easier to engage with. Reading it now felt like a collaboration with the poet. Where she had once found only an echo of his speech in it, now his living mind seemed to drift behind his words. Losing herself in his work, she almost felt that she was in conversation with him, responding to the openness of his work with memories, thoughts, even stories of her own.

She could even stand to read about the flayed man, understanding now how he fitted into the pattern of the whole. Marsyas the satyr – a god of fluid, improvised music, skinned by Apollo for challenging him – had become for both Peter and Kingfisher an image of openness betrayed; of the many ways that the world carved away at its own finest, most lively products. Both men had been to war, and – in their different ways – seen such threshing at first hand.

It struck her as she read that it would be fascinating to combine Peter's words with the *Parr Hinton Fragments*. The two were already so closely linked. Absorbed in thoughts of poetry and music working together, she didn't check her laptop until late in the evening. When she did, she was surprised to find a note from Natalie Ashton.

Sarah –

*Thanks for your email. I'm glad you enjoyed the documentary. It was an important ignition point for me. Kingfisher was a remarkable man.*

*I don't know what happened to Brian. We all got very involved in the music. We went to do some work on Parr Hinton. You could say Parr Hinton did some work on us. Brian didn't take it very well. In the end I think the work he did scared him. I don't think he'll give you a copy of the music, but you never know. He was certainly the last*

*person to have the wax cylinders. I've attached an ecard with the last contact details I had for him. I haven't talked to him for years.*

*I must look up your brother's poetry. It sounds fascinating. I'm sorry for your loss.*

N

When Mayhew picked the phone up, the first thing he said was: "Hello? Sarah?"

It had only rung once. He must have been sitting right next to it.

"That's me. Have you heard about me from Natalie Ashton?"

"Who? No, I haven't spoken to her for years. He said you'd call."

"Who's he?"

"I've got to meet you. I've got something to give you. Where can I see you?"

Mayhew's voice was suffused with a desperate kind of fear. Sarah wondered about the wisdom of meeting him.

"Are you still there?" he said. "I have to see you. I have to give you the music."

"The Kingfisher music?"

"From the programme, yes. He wants you to have it."

Sarah was torn. She did want the music, but Mayhew was scaring her.

"Could you tell me who said I'd call?" she said, stalling for time.

"It's got to be somewhere public," said Mayhew.

That seemed sensible. If she met him in an open, crowded space, she was reasonably confident that she would be safe. She reached a decision.

"I'm in London. Are you coming from Hove?"

She could find out who'd told him about her when they met.

"Yes," he said. "There's a Starbucks in Victoria Station, opposite the bus rank. I can give you the recordings there. Tomorrow morning. Eleven."

"Does that include the wax cylinders?" she said, but Mayhew had already slammed down the phone.

**Mayhew was a** short, overweight man. He had wrapped a shabby overcoat around himself. A tie peaked out of the V of a V neck jumper, bright against a drab and dirty shirt. There were remnants of food spattered across it. He hadn't shaved that morning. He brought a stale sweat tang with him into the busy café.

"It's here."

He hadn't stopped to buy a coffee, had barely sat down before he was fumbling a glittering silver disc out of his pocket.

"All the music – on here. Take it."

He pushed the DVD-ROM across the table, watching intently as Sarah picked it up and put it in her bag.

"You've got it now, haven't you? I've handed it over. Nice and easy to listen to?"

"Yes," said Sarah. "It should be."

"Good." He was already standing up, ready to go. "I've done it." He looked around, as if searching for someone watching.



"I've given it to her!" he shouted. "You can go back to Parr Hinton now! You can leave me alone!"

"Wait," she said. "How did you know me? And are the field recordings on there too?"

"I've done what he asked me to."

"Please..."

Sarah gave him her best pleading look. He sighed, sat back down, and then leaned forward conspiratorially. It was difficult not to flinch away. One hand was scrabbling in another pocket.

"He gave me a picture of you. Said I should keep the music safely stored for when you called. I was going to burn it all."

"Who did?"

"You know who!" His voice was suddenly loud. She noticed a couple at a next door table turning to look at them. "You know who." Now, he was whispering. "The song in the woods. The river in the green. The flayed man."

Grief, then outrage, prickled through her.

"You know about my brother, don't you? You and Natalie – oh, that's cruel. What are you playing at, Mayhew?"

Mayhew looked genuinely mystified. "Your brother?"

He had found what he had been looking for. He pulled it out of his pocket. It was a piece of paper, with brown, dry leaves stuck to it. Taken together, they could have formed the shape of a face. They were smudged with bloody fingerprints.

Now Sarah was pushing her own chair backwards. She just wanted to leave this man and his dead, sick madness.

"Look," he said, pointing at the withered leaves. "It's you."

She was standing up.

"I recognised you as soon as I saw you. He came to me just after I saw the bloody programme again, just when I was about to strike the first match, and told me to keep the music for you now. Today."

As she turned and started to hurry, walking as fast as she could without running, she heard him shout:

"He took the cylinders himself! He said he'd keep them safe for you, but you'd have to go to him to get them!"

**The meeting with** Mayhew confused and saddened her. His madness seemed to have found a hook in her brother's death. She sat on the bus, wondering whether she'd even play the disc. When she got home, she nerved herself for gibberish; possibly something deeply offensive. But Mayhew had been true to his word. The disc was full of MP3s, each one neatly labelled, each one a recognisable component of the *Parr Hinton Fragments*.

Mayhew was a talented multi-instrumentalist. His reworking of the *Fragments* combined synthesiser and live playing, to create versions of Kingfisher's music that both referred back to the composer's time and looked forward into a 1970s vision of the future. As she listened, Sarah began to tap her fingers, imagining how she could play over the recordings, collaborating with them to create something new. Peter's words would fit well with them too, she thought, seasoning their 70s feel with something far more contemporary.

However, her excitement soon began to turn to frustration. The field recordings shouted their absence. Listening to Mayhew's work, and remembering as best she could the

programme's original soundtrack, Sarah was struck by how much texture they had added. There was nothing about Mayhew's work that directly touched the archaic sources that had been so important to Kingfisher. The addition of Kingfisher's field recordings would have changed that. Reaching the end of Mayhew's work, Sarah felt that she had listened to music that only approximated Kingfisher's vision. It failed to embody it.

Sitting back, she realised that she had been using the music to avoid thinking about what Mayhew had said. Kingfisher's obsession with Marsyas had touched him, as it had touched her brother, and her. But Mayhew had only been able to find madness in it. It was sad that such instability had existed in him; sadder still that – she assumed – it had led to the destruction of Kingfisher's field recordings.

She remembered Ashton's comment. Parr Hinton had indeed done some work on Mayhew. The silent village suddenly struck her as being something like Peter's poetry, or Kingfisher's music; a half-made empty structure, waiting for an observing mind to bring it to subjective life. It was sad that the life Mayhew had brought to it had been so warped, that he had not been able to realise that he himself was animating the visions that he saw.

She shook her head, and smiled. She was thinking too much about all this. But the image of the village as a trigger to creativity persisted in her mind, intriguing her. She realised that she wanted to visit the place that had so inspired Kingfisher, and her brother, and Ashton, and led Mayhew into such fear. She was curious as to what it would awaken in her; whether it would help her find a way to bring all their different musics together.

It was decided, then, she thought to herself.

She would travel to Parr Hinton.

And a part of herself that she almost refused to hear wondered what ghosts she might find there.

**It was almost** midnight when Sarah reached Chitterne. She hoped that the darkness would make it easier to avoid any military presence. She left her rental car just down the road from the warning sign. She didn't look at it as she passed, not wanting to be warned off. The woods closed in on the road as she walked. Sarah realised how much of a city girl she'd become. Every rustle around her suggested a presence. She had been glad of the white, shining moon, feeling that its bright light would guide her and help her avoid danger. Now that brightness was making the shadows that surrounded her so very dense.

An owl's smoke-soft hooting drifted in the void. She thought of Mayhew. He had described the flayed man as 'the music in the woods'. She found it comforting to think of the night sounds around her as a kind of performance. The music was soft, and subtle – the wind shushing in the trees, leaves brushing against each other, the calls of hunting animals. A fox barked; a few minutes ago it would have made her jump, but now, filtered through the muting branches, imagined as a single note in a dense aural weave, it had nothing jarring to it. She found that she was imagining the forest as a giant organic harp, trembling into song as nature moved



within and across it. Every few moments there would be a fresh, new melody. None of them would ever be repeated.

Cresting a hill, she found that she was looking down on the village of Parr Hinton. She recognised it from the Kingfisher documentary. Cottages ran down the main and side streets like ghosts of themselves, black windows empty, and the church steeple rose above it all. She thought of a conductor at his lectern, standing over an orchestra. She had expected the village to be in darkness, but to her surprise saw that lights were flickering in some of the small windows. An army unit must have taken up residency for the night. A closer look confirmed it. There was a small group of tanks parked up on the village green, dense blots of darkness in the night. Their crews must have been very relaxed – the sound of untrained voices singing drifted up towards her.

She didn't want to go down into the village while it was occupied. Looking up the small valley, she realised that she could enter the woods and skirt round Parr Hinton, climbing Mercy's Hill when she reached it. She'd be able to explore the stone circle atop it by moonlight, and could then come down and look round the village when – as she hoped they would – the soldiers moved on at dawn. She could while away the remaining hours of the night listening to Mayhew's music, and imagining how to set Peter's words – and her own playing – against it.

She set off into the woods.

She was soon lost. The path through the green had petered out, and she found herself stumbling along, tripping over roots and falling into branches. The sense of peace she'd felt earlier deserted her. The voices from the village disrupted the music of the night, their dissonance making it jagged. Soon, she was tumbling into a light panic, half walking and half running through the night.

A deep sense of presence began to oppress her. She imagined soldiers moving through the darkness, olive drab camouflage folding them into their surroundings. Her brother had been a soldier, so she shouldn't feel threatened; but then she remembered his tales of squaddies, of their sometimes casual brutality, and fear sparked imagination, and she began to run.

Branches snatched at her like cold, brittle fingers. The moonlight helped her avoid most of them, but some still hit and stung her. There seemed to be no way out of the trees. Every so often she would glimpse the village beneath her, but running downhill brought the edge of the forest no nearer. The wind in the leaves whispered threats in secret languages. For a while, she tried to keep to a straight line, going neither up nor down – but Mercy's Hill, looming against the stars, never seemed to come any closer. She climbed up, but could not find the hill's crest.

The incline became steeper and steeper, until at last she was scrabbling on her hands and knees, climbing earth rather than running on it. Her breath whistled in the night. A root slipped under her foot, and she found herself falling, and falling, and falling. Enough time to be surprised by the memory of a little lost otter called Portly, in a book she'd read as a child; and then she hit the ground hard, and there was no longer any world to fall down through.

**A fire was** dancing in front of her. Beyond that, there was the shape of a man, sitting on a log, firelight making his face a collage of scarlet and shadow. The brightness of flame stopped her from seeing anything else but darkness. She went to sit up.

"No. Don't."

The voice was at once deep, and gentle. She thought of a stream, running over rocks; spring leaves rustling; the deep creak of branches, pulled at by the wind.

"You took quite a knock. You should lie there, for now. There's water at hand."

There was indeed – a small, battered flask. She reached for it, and drank. Coolness spread through her, soothing the pounding in her mind. She was reminded of her last hangover. When had that been? A few days ago? A month? Longer? She felt that she had stepped outside time.

"Is that better?" said the man.

"Yes. Thank you."

She lay back. A soft breeze shivered across her, bringing voices. The soldiers were still singing, but now their music seemed softer and more distant.

"Who are you?" she said. "Are you one of them?"

The man laughed. "No. Not that, not at all. I'm what you might call a caretaker. A gardener."

"Where are we?"

"On my hill. By the stones. I found you in the woods, and carried you here. It's lucky I was passing by."

"Yes."

"Now, you should rest. Can I play for you?"

"Play?"

"I have my pipes here. It will help you sleep, and heal."

"Won't the soldiers hear us?"

"No. They're singing themselves. They can't find us tonight."

"Oh. OK."

White flashed on the other side of the fire, as the man's instrument came out. He put it to his lips, and started to play. Sarah thought for a moment that it was very important that she should try and see him. But then soft notes were drifting in the air like smoke, completing the songs of the soldiers, and of the forest, and of the night; and it was so very hard for her to stay awake. There was one question she had to ask, though, before his music soothed her into a far gentler darkness than the one she had emerged from.

"Are you my brother?"

He laughed again – but this time, so much more sadly.

"I knew your brother well, Sarah. But Peter died in Basra, and you buried him four months ago."

"I wanted to tell him I was sorry..."

"It's too late for that, now. But there are other ways for you to reach him."

And then, the music began again, and Sarah could not stop it from pulling her into sleep.

**Soft dew had** landed on Sarah's face, chilling it. That, and the high whine of heavy diesel engines throttling into gear, woke her. She opened her eyes. The broken village was fresh in the dawn. Four tanks were driving out of it, carving brown tracks in the fields as they passed. She lay still until they had

passed over the brow of the hill, and out of sight.

She was lying by the remains of a camp fire. Beyond it, a circle of stones, slewed like a nipple on the slope of Mercy's Hill; and then trees, and then, below, the empty village. Her head was nestled on her pack, her sleeping bag carefully draped over her. Sitting up, she found that she had been sleeping on a bed of light branches and leaves.

There was no sign of anyone else.

She stood up, and shook herself down. Something dark and sticky was smeared across her coat; sap, she thought at first, but then saw that it was red on her hand when she tried to brush it away. Perhaps she had bled when she had fallen – but, feeling her head, she could find no trace of a wound.

A couple of minutes, and she was walking down into the village. The church was locked. She thought of the subtle poetry that her brother had found in it; the music that it had inspired in Kingfisher; the madness that had come to Mayhew. None of that was evident now. In the dawn light, it only looked broken and empty – something like a half-built stage set, or a canvas awaiting paint. She poked around in some of the houses, but there was nothing to be found beyond empty ration packs and a few broken chairs and tables.

Walking back to the car only took a few minutes. Sarah was surprised at how at ease she felt; how happy she was not to have been overwhelmed by the experience of Parr Hinton. Peter's poetry and Kingfisher's music still existed, two different ways of understanding it. Mayhew stood as a warn-

ing. Now, she was free to develop her own interpretation of the empty village, and of the wider world of which it was a part. She passed the military sign by the gate, and smiled to herself.

The car was where she had left it. She went to unlock it, and then, opening the door, was surprised to see a large wooden box on the passenger seat. She pulled its cover off. It was full of small leather tubes, each one tied shut with a bit of twine. Dried leaves and moss had been packed between the tubes to cushion and protect them. She picked one out. It had a handwritten label on it – 'Chilmark, August 18th, 1912 – John Addiscombe, Long Lankin'. There were also two numbers printed on it, a four and a one. Looking back into the box, she could see that all the other tubes had similar labels on, and were similarly numbered. None of the numbers went higher than six.

Astonished, and wanting to be sure that she should be astonished, Sarah untied the cord that held the case together. One end of it opened up; she shook it gently, and a wax cylinder dropped out, falling into her waiting hand as if it had always been meant to be there.

**Al Robertson** has published short stories in *Interzone*, *Black Static* and elsewhere, and is currently completing his second novel. He's also a poet and vocalist with drone metallers Graan. His weird fiction, music and poetry blog is at [www.allumination.co.uk](http://www.allumination.co.uk). He lives and works in London.

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# BOOK ZONE

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## THE UNCERTAIN PLACES

Lisa Goldstein

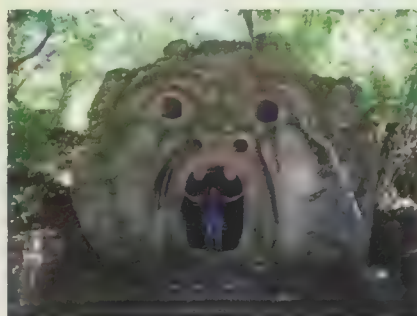
Tachyon Publications, 240pp, \$14.95 pb

The story invariably begins with 'once upon

a time' and ends 'and they all lived happily ever after'. The protagonist unthinkingly makes a bad bargain and inadvertently agrees to a sacrifice he or she later realises is unacceptable. Usually, the resourceful hero or heroine manages to trick the fairy into undoing the bargain and restoring the status quo, while conveniently retaining the benefits of the bargain. But what if the fairy is smarter than the protagonist after all, and, in undoing the bad bargain, offers one that was far worse in the long run but without any immediate bad effects? And what if the effects of that bargain persist into the present day? What happens then? These questions sit at the heart of Lisa Goldstein's *The Uncertain Places*, which intertwines the secret history of a lost fairy story with a period of immense social upheaval in California.

This particular story begins in 1971, with best friends, Will and Ben, who are students at Berkeley, across the bay from San Francisco. We often look back to that time with nostalgia, as though it were some kind of magical period, but for Will in particular, 'There was never music like that,

## Lisa Goldstein: Uncertain Times



First, a question a number of people wanted me to ask when I said I would be interviewing you. Even with the excursion into writing under a pseudonym (*Daughter of Exile* and *The Divided Crown* by Isabel Glass), it's been a while since we saw a novel from you. People wondered what you'd been doing in that gap, and indeed why there was such a break.

I'm not sure why it took so long. Part of it is the discouraging state of publishing today – while I was writing the novel I had no idea if it would ever be published or not. I actually gave up writing it at one



point, and the only reason I went back to it is because I was enjoying it and I wanted to see what the characters would do next. I also wrote some short stories in the break.

It struck me immediately that on one level your new novel, *The Uncertain Places*, is a 'secret history', in common with a number of your earlier novels. Myself, I enjoy reading secret histories, but I wondered what the attraction was to you as a writer.

I love secret histories. I love making connections no one else sees are there, but which become obvious once you've



never those intense discussions, never so many people so passionately committed to changing the world.' In the middle of this is Will, 'stupefied with wonder, startled and delighted at every turn', and never more so than when he travels with Ben, north out of San Francisco and into the wine country of Napa Valley to visit the Feierabends, the family of Ben's new girlfriend, Maddie.

The Feierabend house seems also to have emerged from a fairytale, 'as if Hansel and Gretel's witch had taken a correspondence course in architecture.' It is not so much a house as a series of houses, each one concealing something older behind it, and this, as it turns out, provides a useful metaphor for the Feierabend family and for its stories. Livvy, Rose, Maddie and their mother, Sylvie, seem to live at a tangent to the world, engaging with it but remaining somehow untroubled by it. They live comfortably, almost unthinkingly, among beautiful things. Whatever they turn their hands to, they are successful, and indeed expect to be, none more so than Maddie, who sees no reason to doubt that she will have a career in Hollywood. Livvy and

Rose are more self-effacing but neither do they question their luck, perhaps simply because this is how their lives have always been. Theirs is an enviable lifestyle, almost a dream in itself, and Will finds it difficult to believe that he too has become part of the fairytale when he and Livvy begin a relationship.

However, from the outset, Will suspects that there is something odd about the family. In the house and the countryside around, he meets strange people whose presence cannot be accounted for. When Livvy inexplicably falls asleep and the family refuse to do anything about this, instead behaving as though it is entirely normal, he realises that something is indeed very wrong. It is thanks to Ben that Will learns about the lost Grimms' fairytale, the story of the Bondmaid, told by Klara Feierabend to the Grimm brothers but then apparently suppressed before it could be published. The original Bondmaid fell permanently asleep as payment for her family being rescued from poverty; later her father renegotiated the bargain so that she would sleep for only seven years, on the understanding that in

all future generations of the family, one member would at some point fall asleep for seven years to continue the payment. While asleep, the bondmaid would help the fairy folk to wage war against their enemies and keep magic alive in the world, or so the story went. Subsequent generations did not question the renegotiated bargain and even when they did, their misgivings have been brushed to one side. It falls to Will, the outsider, to question the Feierabends' complacent acceptance of this situation, and to ask whether such an old bargain can persist in the modern world.

It's an interesting question that Goldstein poses, and there is no easy answer to be found. What constitutes a 'happy ever after' for one person may bring misery to another. Perhaps the stories of one continent cannot survive transplantation to another without being somehow changed in the process. No matter how carefully hidden away they might be, sooner or later, as the territory is charted, they're brought into the light of day. It's what happens then that Goldstein has so intriguingly explored in this deeply absorbing novel.

## Review and Interview by Maureen Kincaid Speller

pointed them out. I started one novel, *Dark Cities Underground*, by coming up with interesting subjects more or less at random and sort of making a bet with myself that I could connect them – children's books, Underground systems, and Egyptian gods. It worked so well I tried doing that with this book too, but for some reason some of the subjects I picked wouldn't fit themselves into the story – there was originally going to be more about dictionaries and Grimm's Law of sound shifts, for example. (Now that I've written that I can see how boring that would have been, so perhaps it was all for the best.) Now I think that everything fitting together so neatly in *Dark Cities Underground* was partly a result of beginner's luck.

I also like finding coincidences along the way, things that match up with whatever bizarre theory I've come up with. It was weird seeing how many children's books took place underground, for example. Then I found out that one of the children who was the inspiration for Peter Pan was killed by an Underground train, and that Kenneth Grahame's son was killed by a

train as well. My first thought was, 'Wow, that's terrible', but my second thought, I'm sorry to say, was, 'Hey, I can use that.'

Also, working out secret histories means that you get to read books about things that interest you and call it research. I do a lot of that.

**I'm interested, too, in the way so many of your books interleave Oakland and San Francisco with layers of myth and magic. I remember you saying in an old interview that you'd felt the US wasn't magical enough. Is this an attempt to invest it with greater magic or are you perhaps trying to tease out something that is already there, in your view, but that people don't notice.**

It's both – Oakland has its own magic (which perhaps I noticed more since that interview) and I do want to show people that, and I want to invest it with magic as well. Napa Valley, to the north of Oakland, seems fascinating and mysterious too, this self-contained valley that's been going about its business making wine for over a hundred years. It seemed a perfect place to

put a family with a secret tradition going back generations.

**With particular reference to *The Uncertain Places*, I am thinking about how a story brought over by emigrants persists within the family, shaping its behaviour, but how it also seems to become part of the fabric of the house and landscape through contact with the people.**

Like a lot of people in the United States, I'm envious of the traditions and stories of Europe, which go back far longer than ours. (Except for Native American stories, but they didn't fit into this book.) Also, my parents are immigrants, so I grew up with a sense that most fantastic and magical things took place outside of the United States. My mother's stories in particular, about growing up in Hungary, had tinges of the supernatural around their edges, which seemed so different from my own experience growing up in Los Angeles. Try as I might, I can't write a fantasy story about Los Angeles, to invest it with magic – though I haven't given up yet. →



One of the things that struck me about the novel was the question of responsibility that seems to lie behind it. A family has everything so long as one member of each generation sleeps for seven years, and they are so used to having everything that they never really question it. And there's this sense that someone needs to take responsibility. That's something that seems to have echoes in other novels, right back to *The Red Magician*. I wonder how important that sense of responsibility is to you.

I was also struck when you talked of your mother's stories of Hungary: is there some sense of being outside (I see it in *Red Magician*, in *Tourists*, and so on) that is important in how you perceive the worlds you write about?

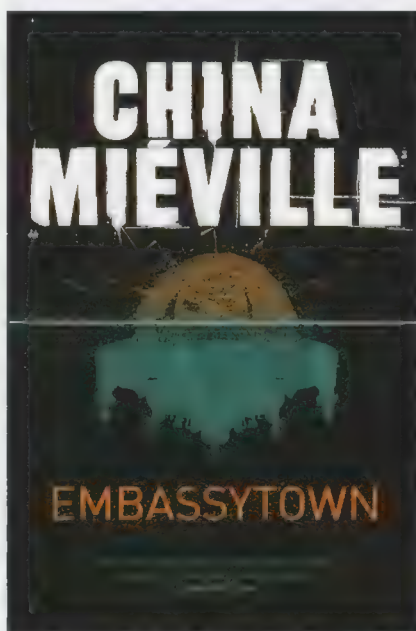
I'm not sure about responsibility, but the theme of the outsider definitely shows up in my books. My mother was from Hungary and had a community of friends and relatives from Hungary, and if that wasn't enough to make me feel a little strange in the middle of Los Angeles, my father was one of the few people in this group who wasn't Hungarian but German. So I always felt like I didn't really belong anywhere, didn't understand all the cues and messages going on around me, either in school or among my mother's friends. And then of course, like everyone else in science fiction I was a complete geek, which made me an outsider as well. I drew on all of that for the scenes where Will meets the Feierabend family, where he doesn't understand any of the jokes or customs.

Being an outsider was one of the things that drew me to science fiction and fantasy in the first place, because when you're reading about a new world or a different society you're coming in as an outsider, at least at first. And of course there are all those stories about aliens and alienation.

**Finally, what is it about Los Angeles?**

I want to write stories about Los Angeles, about growing up there, but try as I might it just doesn't seem magical enough to me. My brother (who still lives there, and loves it) and I argue about this all the time, and I've promised him that I'll do it some day, but so far everything I've tried has failed. It seems too new, and not only that but everyone who comes there seems to reinvent themselves – there's nothing to draw on, to use as an anchor for a story. Some day, though...

Lisa's website: [www.brazenhussies.net/goldstein/](http://www.brazenhussies.net/goldstein/)



## EMBASSYTOWN

China Miéville

Macmillan, 405pp, £16.99 hb

**Reviewed by Paul Kincaid**

China Miéville writes about cities. Not just any city, but cities that need to be seen in pairs, that echo or model each other, that can only ever be fully understood by putting the city together with its partner. Think of the London under London of *King Rat* or *Un Lun Dun*; the train society that models the Bas Lag society in *The Iron Council*; the interwoven cities of *The City and the City*. Now we get the fragile human Embassytown, and the incomprehensible alien city that enfolds it. Embassytown is presented as a foreign and perhaps diseased growth within the body of the overtly biological city that surrounds it, so we know there must be a struggle between the two. But we also know, because this is the story that Miéville always tells, that resolution will come not with the death or destruction of one of other of the combatants, but with them finding a *modus vivendi*, a way of coming to understand each other.

And understanding is explicitly at issue in *Embassytown*, because this is a novel about language.

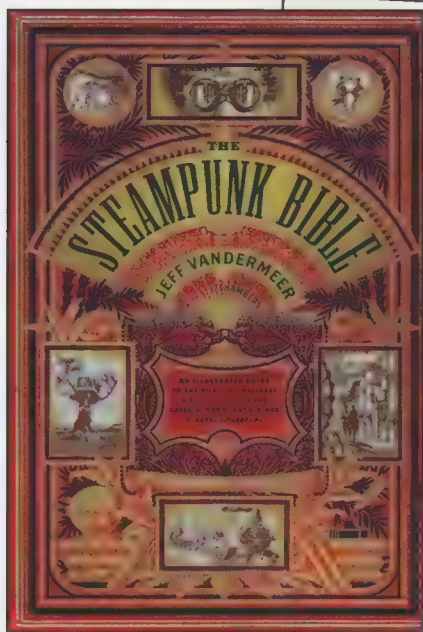
Embassytown is right on the edge of known and navigable space. It depends for everything from the air that it breathes to its commercial success upon the biotechnology of the Ariekei, known as the Hosts; it depends for its political

survival upon the colonising power of Bremen, a place so distant that ships reach Embassytown only once a year. But Embassytown isn't just isolated physically, it is isolated linguistically. The Ariekei Language seems learnable, but however well humans learn to speak it the Ariekei do not even hear them. Eventually it is found that two voices speaking together are needed before the Ariekei can even be made aware that an attempt at communication is being made. Ariekei speech is always represented as one word above another, another form of the pairing that runs right through this novel. Now cloned human twins, carefully cultivated to ensure they are identical in every aspect, are raised as Ambassadors, who speak for humanity to the Hosts and thus become the default aristocracy of Embassytown.

Another peculiarity of Ariekei speech is that it can only address the actual; Ariekei cannot lie. Indeed certain humans are drafted in to perform curious little tasks that can then be incorporated into Ariekei language as similes. One such human simile is Avice Benner Cho, the girl who ate what was given to her, who goes on to become an immerser, one of those able to navigate through the complexities of interstellar space, before returning to her home planet. Not long after her return, a new Ambassador arrives from Bremen; but the new Ambassador is not twins, the two parts of the one person are not even alike, and when they speak Language some dissonance acts like a powerful drug upon the Hosts. Things fall apart rapidly: like any drug, the new Ambassador's voice has different effects, despair, decay, anger, some Ariekei even destroy their ability to speak in order to render themselves immune to the effects. And Avice must find a way to communicate with the voiceless Ariekei, and teach them how to lie, in order to preserve Embassytown.

As we might expect of Miéville, his description of the alien is profoundly vivid and detailed, and his exploration of ideas is rich and rewarding. Nevertheless, there is a sense that there is too much going on in the novel (the account of Avice's life as an immerser really has little part to play in what follows) and at times Miéville seems to be trying just a little too hard to make his philosophical point or repeat a significant pattern. It's a readable novel full of incident and will doubtless make many beat of the year lists (including, probably, my own) yet it seems to fall a little short of his very best.





## THE STEAMPUNK BIBLE

Jeff Vandermeer with S.J. Chambers

Abrams Image, 224pp, \$24.99/£16.99 hb

Reviewed by Jim Steel

A humorous throw-away comment; such are the germs of movements. When K.W. Jeter coined the term as a portmanteau cyberpunk homage to the Victorian pastiches that he was writing alongside Tim Powers and James Blaylock, he could hardly have foreseen the name sticking around for another couple of decades.

*The Steampunk Bible* is a very beautiful thing indeed, reflecting in its amply-illustrated production the handcrafted inventions that pepper the genre. As is fitting, it starts with Poe, Verne *et al*, moving through the penny-dreadful Edisonades, up past Moorcock and Jeter, examines the strange hiatus that came after *The Difference Engine*, and then arrives at the current fiction explosion. Some of the older writers are delightfully cynical about the new wave of steampunk, while Cherie Priest, Catherynne M. Valente and Scott Westerfeld are all interviewed at length and successfully put the case for the current crop of writers. There are also detailed examinations of comics and films that follow a similar trajectory. Bryan Talbot, Alan Moore and Hayao Miyazaki feature heavily here, of course, but there are also plenty of others who are much more obscure. The *Bible* is not an encyclopaedia but it could conceivably function as one.

Steampunk is famously a movement



without a manifesto, being archly aesthetic by nature, and a guest feature by Bruce Sterling is as close to a call-to-arms as you'll find here, where, with tongue firmly in cheek, he states that the heaviest scenesters are into the 'punk' side much more than the 'steam' side. But there is a serious aspect to all of this as well. The Arts and Crafts movement and John Ruskin's 'The Nature of Gothic' are cited and are used to illuminate the values of the Steampunk movement. Any perceived contradiction in the modern eulogisation of nineteenth-century tech is demonstrably superficial; both systems celebrate the survival of the individual against the monolithic tendencies of industry.

There is also plenty of coverage of the corsets'n'absinthe lifestyle brigade. Not my area of interest – I suspect many are merely Goths who tired of their colour palate – but they do need to be included here, and the fashion articles are written with a laudable levity: "Sadly, most men do not look good in stockings and have therefore no recourse but socks. For

women, however, stockings are an excellent option for the housing of legs and provide additional protection against the elements which is particularly useful in the colder climes. In areas prone to airship battles, you may want to consider metal stockings."

The *Bible* is naturally strong on the associated arts and sculpture, demolishing the assumption that the style consists merely of gluing cog-wheels onto laptops, and much of what we are shown succeeds in giving the impression of a wistful alternate world. Real-life mechanical elephants jostle with lithographs of impossible flying vehicles. The small number of Steampunk bands, most of which seem to combine varying amounts of psych-folk with chamber music, are probably an acquired taste for many but these days it's easy enough to track them down on the internet once you know that they exist. The only obvious absences from the *Bible* are the role-playing games such as *Space 1889* which, for a while, seemed to be the last survivors of the original (nineteen-)eighties incarnation.

By a strange twist of fate, the commercial success of this book may well be determined by the effects of our modern shopping technology. *The Steampunk Bible* seems almost to be designed for those of us who are still bookshop browsers; it's a delight to hold and the faint embossing effect of its gloss-coated cover adds to the retro-feel. Online retail outlets must fail to do it justice, but how many bookshops are left near you these days? Nostalgia manifests itself in many different ways.







**FENRIR**  
**M.D. Lachlan**

Gollancz, 504pp, £18.99 hb/£12.99 tpb

**Reviewed by Lawrence Osborn**

*Fenrir* is the eagerly awaited sequel to M.D. Lachlan's first fantasy novel, *Wolfsangel*, which was published to much acclaim last year.

The new novel is nothing if not action packed. It opens with an army of Vikings led by King Sigfrid besieging Paris in 885/886 AD. Chief among their demands is that Count Eudes hand over his sister, Aelis. Naturally enough she is not willing to sacrifice herself to them. Torn between love of his sister and a sense of duty to his city, Eudes has summoned the holy monk Jehan to persuade her to accede voluntarily to the Vikings' demands. However, Jehan fears that she is to be literally the victim of a pagan sacrifice and that surrendering her to such a fate could imperil all their souls.

But the besieging Vikings are not alone in wanting Aelis. The Viking Prince Helgi of the Rus has also heard of her and has sent the wolfman Sindre to Paris to offer her his protection. He arrives just in time to protect her from a band of berserkers and a sinister shaman, Hugin, who clearly wishes to see her dead. With Sindre's help, she escapes from the besieged city. Thus the scene is set for an epic journey across war-torn northern Europe as Aelis tries to reach the safety offered by Helgi with the berserkers and Hugin in hot pursuit.

Also drawn unwillingly into the pursuit

is Jehan. Originally blind and crippled, he is unable to avoid being captured by the berserkers. While their prisoner, he is forced to eat human flesh in a mockery of the Eucharist, an incident that initiates a horrific process during which he is gradually transformed into Fenrir, the apocalyptic wolf of Norse mythology. I found Lachlan's portrayal of Jehan and his inner struggle against what is happening to him utterly convincing. In spite of the change that is overtaking him, he never abandons his Christian faith and continues to resist the transformation to the very end of the novel.

In the course of the journey, Aelis, too, undergoes a dramatic transformation. It appears that, together with Hugin's sister, the prophetess Munin, and Helgi's daughter, Svava, she is one of the bearers of the twenty-four runes that constitute Viking magic. Initially this manifests itself in small ways such as her ability to control horses. However, with Munin's death, she becomes a sorceress of considerable power. I must admit I found the ease with which she adapted to her new situation far less convincing than Jehan's struggles.

But Aelis, Jehan and Hugin are just pawns in a larger game being played by the god Odin. In *Wolfsangel*, his plan to become incarnate and so provoke the apocalypse was thwarted by Loki's meddling. Now he is trying again with these characters who it appears are (loosely) reincarnations of the dramatis personae of *Wolfsangel*. And Loki is once more doing whatever he can to frustrate Odin's designs. Essentially the same drama is being played out again, but in a very different setting.

My main reservation about the novel is its unremitting darkness. Apart from a few touches of (dark) humour and one major romantic interlude, it is a tale of an inexorable descent into tragedy with little sense that anything has been resolved at the end of the story. On the contrary, it merely seems to set the scene for another round of the conflict between Odin and Loki.

In spite of that, *Fenrir* has a lot going for it: plenty of action, strong characters and vivid description. Lachlan's refreshing take on magic – that power is achieved through suffering – is again evident here. Since it is a sequel, the reader's understanding of forces at work beneath the surface would be greatly enriched by previously having read *Wolfsangel*. However, the story is sufficiently independent of its predecessor for it be read and enjoyed on its own.



**KENTAUROS**  
**Gregory Feeley**

New Haven Review, 98pp, \$15 pb

**Reviewed by Iain Emsley**

Kentauros, the son of Ixion, is the first centaur but is largely forgotten now in the bowdlerised versions. Pindar appears to be the only classical writer to have written the story down, although parallels are drawn with Hesiod's tale of Pandora and her box. Unlike other Greek myths, the progenation of the centaur is largely forgotten and the character itself is marginal. It is rarely written about as the main character, living in a strange interzone of the fantastic and the human.

After his act of patricide, Ixion wanders the world as a cursed figure. After Zeus relieves him of this, Ixion stays at Zeus's house but develops a lust for his wife, Hera. On being told this, Zeus creates a clone of Hera's body from a cloud, the eidolon, whom Ixion forces himself on. After this point it appears that the eidolon is forgotten.

Feeley's extended essay explores various sections of the myth in three parts. The first part looks at various versions of the Greek myth and explores the issues within it, linguistically and contextually, in both fiction and essay. In the second part, he looks at its reception by a party of Romantic poets who find their own meaning to the myth in fiction and poetry. In the final section, Feeley explores the lasting memory of the myth.

The myth is troubling due to the act



which creates the centaur. Feeley looks at the world of Ancient Greek attitudes towards sexuality in both gods and mortals. Zeus comes across as a despotic, controlling character taking on different forms to sate his desires at will. In contrast he cannot stand the thought of anyone, let alone a mortal, having the same carnal thoughts towards his wife. Despite being a goddess, Hera has no say in the trap. Though Zeus makes a copy of her, she is still the unwilling party who is raped through a mortal's hubris. There is some attempt to contextualise this but perhaps it is too alien a mindset for us now.

Feeley follows this up with a story featuring Kentauros. He builds the character as one in the middle of being animal and human, real and fantastic, and mortal and minor deity. He is unable to comprehend his own being and nature, and violently forces himself to the edge as he tries to find a space.

The second part is set in a gathering of Romantic poets, including Shelley, Byron and Leigh Hunt. After Mary becomes interested in the story, Hunt writes a poem about Kentauros. The discussion turns to the liminal nature of the creature but it turns into being a metaphorical nature. It becomes a metaphor for being a permanent outsider, despised and distrusted by all sides. Feeley explores how myths grow and change into something completely different for each reader and age.

Feeley begins tying the two ends together in the final part whilst discussing the simplicity of myths. Although the myth is sketchy, not fleshed out through retelling, it is something that can be used to think about the nature of the outsider or the in-between. Even here, though, the centaur retains its elusive nature, as when the young men catch up with Kentauros fulfilling his nature, but he sublimates back into a cloud.

Using a mixture of essays, poetry and fiction, Gregory Feeley takes the reader through the various meanings and perspectives. Underneath this, though, is an exploration of the notion of equipoise, the uncertainty which is a feature of the fantastic. It should be fundamentally unstable and force the unwary to think. Using a variety of forms, *Kentauros* is a short, thought-provoking exploration of the centaur. One disappointment might be the lack of bibliography or notes to follow up the leads given and to suggest further avenues to explore. Perhaps in this sense, this book echoes Pindar's casual telling of the myth.



## SONGS OF THE EARTH

Elspeth Cooper

Gollancz, 420pp, £18.99 hb

Reviewed by Ian Hunter

'This is the fantasy debut of 2011' screams the blurb on *Songs of the Earth*, but I want to know why the illustration looks like horror writer Gary McMahon crouching down with a big sword and wearing Aragon-style garb. Apologies to Gary and everyone else if you don't think it looks like the up-and-coming horror author, but I still think it does. The blurb also hints that it might be a story in the style of Joe Abercrombie, or Patrick Rothfuss, or Kristin Cashore, all authors I've heard of but never actually read.

But wham, bam, thank you, Ms Cooper, because we are straight into the action as novice Gair is about to be dragged from his cell and, after much inquisitive and harsh questioning, to be sentenced for witchcraft. Gair can hear the songs of the Earth and clumsily wield the power it brings, but you would have thought, given how dimly the Church views magic, he would have been a bit more careful than to get caught displaying his power; but he does, and now he is about to be executed for his troubles.

There is a sting early on in this tale, and more than a sting on Gair's hand, as the Preceptor passes his sentence, which is, surprisingly, commuted to branding and banishment if Gair can get over the border fast enough, although some of the other members of the Church's hierarchy

have ideas of their own about how to deal with this outrageous breaking of tradition and protocol. Knights are dispatched to make sure that Gair never reaches the boundary.

Fortunately, he is being helped by a stranger called Alderan who has several mine-shafts full of hidden

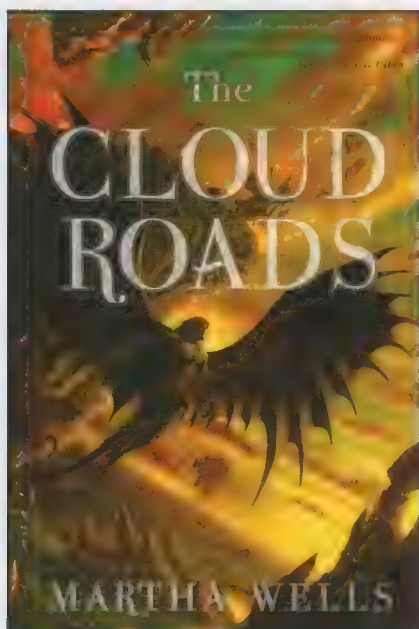
depths and is surprisingly unruffled by Gair's predicament, even when the Knights are being led by a doggedly determined Witchfinder who is always on Gair's heels, and in his head too.

The pace and the plot doesn't let up in these opening stages, and Cooper plays what I call the Stephen King/*Shining* card by frustratingly, but cleverly, switching the action away from Gair at a crucial moment to give us a tantalising glimpse of a Guardian of the Veil in action, steering a stag back through the barrier to the world where it belongs and doing a hasty repair job on the thinning Veil which holds back all sorts of nasties from entering Gair's world. If he can get away, Gair could learn how to master the magic around him and become a Guardian in the process.

Since I'm not a reader of high fantasy I can't really say how original *Songs of the Earth* is, but to my weary old mind I was reminded of *Star Wars*, given the similarities between the magic of the Song and the Force, Gair's orphan status, and his tutelage by the mysterious Alderan – that name doesn't help me to avoid the comparisons either. What works in Cooper's favour is the strength of her characterisation, and the manifestation of the Song, and a few twists and turns in Gair's story that raises him above being merely a conventional hero.

It's a first novel, and it does show in places, particularly in the middle sections where Gair learns how to wield his power and forms various relationships (or not) with the Chosen Few around him. There are some passages where we get a bit of dialogue-driven info-dumping which could have been tweaked here and there, but by the time we reached the epilogue I was completely hooked by both the story and the improving writing style. Closing the book, I wished I could have reached out to the reading pile and plucked *Trinity Moon* – the next book in the *Wild Hunt* trilogy – off the top and started reading it there and then, which is as high in the way of praise that I can possibly give.





### THE CLOUD ROADS

Martha Wells

Night Shade Books, 300pp, \$14.99 pb

*Reviewed by Juliet E. McKenna*

Moon has been thrown out of many places, even though he's a talented hunter and handsome enough to interest most females in this jungle-clad world of nomads which Martha Wells introduces with admirable speed and conciseness. Better yet, right from the start, it's clear we're somewhere distinctly different from any quasi-medieval fantasy world.

There are flying islands overhead, lurking ravenous beasts, and it's females rather than women who look favourably on Moon. The inhabitants may be humanoid but they are very far from human with their grey-green skin, green hair and patches of glittering scales. Crucially, this is no mere flourish but a concept whose implications are woven through the story from start to finish. We're used to speculative fiction where society constrains an individual's choices. Biology as a decisive factor is much more unusual. This really keeps the reader guessing, adding a whole new facet to character motivation.

Not that Moon realises any of this. Why should he? This is his reality and he accepts it. Thus the world is made all the more convincing for the reader, and all the more alien, by Wells's finely-tuned instinct for what to explain, and how, always in keeping with Moon's viewpoint, and what to simply show without further clarification;

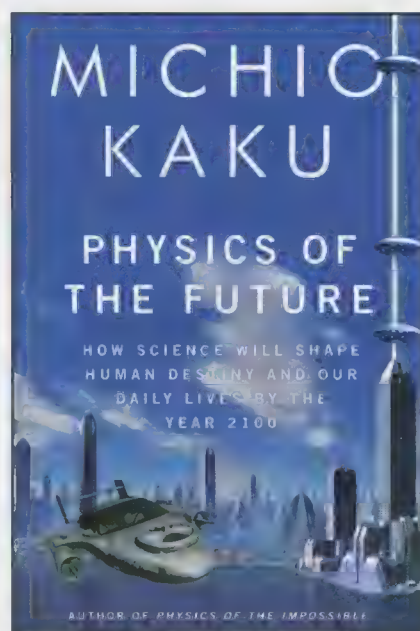
other species with blue skins or horns, merrow-people, treelings, skyings and waterlings, some sentient, some not, some with magic. Anyone believing that creating an immersive setting means piling on the detail can learn how less is definitely more.

Moon is living from day to day as best an orphan wanderer can. Night-time's a different matter. Then he can stretch his wings, literally. He's a shapeshifter, able to transform in a way impossible for the groundlings. He must always hide this from them though since the only winged beasts they know are the murderous, sadistic Fell. That's all Moon knows; he's yet to encounter any others of his kind. Discovery, inevitably, means disaster and exile again. The only question is how much will Moon suffer before he escapes?

What then? Discovering what he is prompts far more troublesome questions. Who is he and where did he come from? No one in his new-found sanctuary has much time to help him find answers, even those few who might care to. The shape-shifting Raksuras are under threat. Moon can help fight their battles but can anyone or anything help secure decisive victory in this bloody conflict? Tension mounts as setbacks follow successes and vice versa, forcing Moon and his allies to adapt their tactics.

Well before the swift-moving story goes too far along that route, the enemy proves equally as complex. Though understanding the Fell doesn't make them any less menacing. It just makes Moon and the Raksuras' peril all the more desperate. By the time the reader's familiar enough with this world to guess where things are going, they're really going to be hoping that they're wrong.

Mention biology and most people think sex. There's sex, in the sense of desires and complications integral to driving the story, but no graphic detail because that's no more relevant than other detail Wells chooses to omit. Along with a youthful protagonist finding his place, this makes the book a good 'Young Adult' read. But it's far from those sanitised, simplistic tales which that label's slapped on; for instance, one of the underlying debates is how and when it's acceptable to lie or at least to withhold full disclosure. It reminds me of the SF/Fantasy I read as a teen, long before YA was categorised. Those books explored adult concepts without 'adult content'; the complexity of morality and the potential, uncaring harshness of life. This story's conclusion satisfies on all those counts as well as leaving me eager to read the sequel.



### PHYSICS OF THE FUTURE

Michio Kaku

Doubleday/Allen Lane, 390pp, \$28.95/£22 hb

*Reviewed by Tony Lee*

Wearing clothes means going online. Bathrooms have auto-doc sensors to check your health. Intellectual capitalism replaces commodity trading. Nano-bot needles swarm to explore nearby stars. Cyber-augmented reality enables 'time' tourism, a revolution in entertainments, and interactive environments. We could be the last generation that has to die... Isaac Asimov pronounced that humanity's big job for the 21st century was "dismantling the myth of the nation state," and science and technology are clearly the best tools for achieving that. Asimov also noted that our basic concepts of both 'work' and 'education' would have to change quite radically to meet the profound challenges ahead of us. Asimov's ideas are not the main focus of this book, but it generally agrees with such bemusingly utopian futurism.

Being so relentlessly optimistic in many of its progressive assumptions, Kaku's book (a follow-up to *Physics of the Impossible*) tends to avoid the most 'contentious' issues of population controls imposed by the State, huge difficulties of redistributing wealth fairly across metropolitan societies and rural communities, and steers clear of discussing thorny ethical issues about biotech in any detail. The positivism of Kaku's vision for this century extends through rapid advances in computers (including a kind of weak 'AI'),

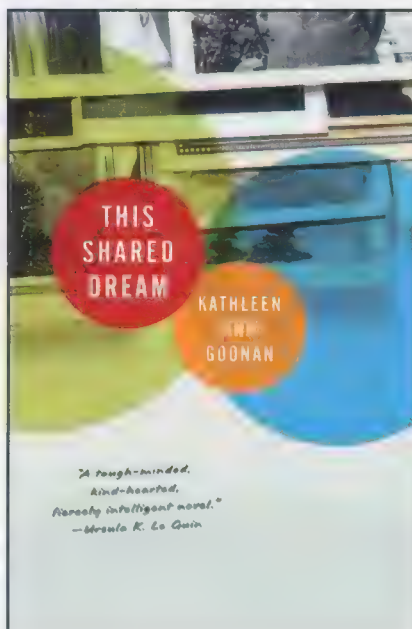


medicine, energy sources (hot fusion will do if the grail of cold fusion is unattainable!), unmanned space travel, and the burgeoning global-political maturity of a 'Type I' planetary Kardashev civilisation, if we survive to overcome mankind's worst flaws.

Making this text easily accessible to the layman and general readers is vital to Kaku's conversational and enlightening style and he is fond of using popular sci-fi references as an imagistic shorthand to instantly conjure various innovations without having to explain in detail how futuristic technology may appear while in use. This sketchily descriptive flair is a noteworthy aspect of the book's engaging appeal and yet reveals a weakness in its author's thought processes. Kaku obviously recognises that predicting any scientific progress and technological advancement is inherently rather foolish, as nobody (including SF authors) is very successful at speculating when any particular eventuality will occur. Paradigm shifts and vaguer notions of evolutionary changes are safer bets, and that's what is essential for the tomorrow's worldview agenda here.

Kaku often refers to a 'caveman' principle of human nature, which means that many such developments as 'virtuality' might well be rejected by all but early adopters of new tech because many people prefer ownership of physical objects, and we can actually see this in action today as many readers of this magazine will always choose printed books over e-books. But, of course, we are the last generation who grew up learning mostly from books, so our emotional attachment to such hardcopy is just a nostalgia that the 21st century's smarter children will probably never share.

Where *Physics of the Future* excels is the author's assemblage of commentary from a range of research specialists, applied-science gurus, and new product experts. Telling quotes from theorists, industrialists, gadget creators, media mavens and the suggestions of top SF writers pepper chapters with speculative insights and avoid many pitfalls of textbook-ism. Kaku is astute at sorting propaganda from genuine prescience, and there's some undeniable wisdom here. However, the closing chapter, 'A Day in the Life of 2100', is the most obviously science fictional, in as much as its content is almost pure info-dump, with the viewpoint character's diary musings, social commentary, and the awkward dialogue components of its narrative providing a few especially poor examples of purple prose. Never mind, no soothsayer is ever perfect.



### THIS SHARED DREAM

Kathleen Ann Goonan

Tor, 369pp, \$25.99 hb

Reviewed by Peter Loftus

*This Shared Dream* is the follow up to the John W. Campbell Best Novel winner *In War Times*, in which Goonan introduced the characters of Bette and Sam Dance. The two meet *somewhen* in WWII and are plunged into an odyssey to end the war using a time-altering device created by enigmatic physicist Eliani Hadnitz. Returning to civilian life, they see the power of the changes they have wrought and begin to think about the type of world their three children will inherit. Before long their mission becomes even more complicated: to change present reality for the better.

Their mission sees them tackling the Vietnam conflict and preventing the assassination of John F. Kennedy. There is a price to pay, however. Somewhere along the way they become unmoored in time, drifting from the temporal thread that holds their children.

*This Shared Dream* takes up the story several years later when the three children have grown into adults. The world has been vastly improved in many ways thanks to the efforts of Bette and Sam. For the children, it is a confusing place. Haunted by memories of a different *when* and still coping with the fact of their abandonment, they strive to make sense of their brave new world. Meanwhile, Bette is still out

there *somewhen* trying to come home.

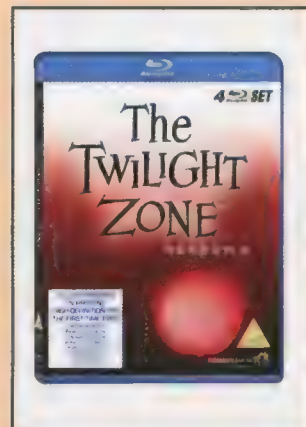
Much of the action in *This Shared Dream* takes place *elsewhen*. The back story from *In War Times* is tremendously important and is referred to constantly. Readers not familiar with it might feel, like the children, cast away in a reality they don't understand. The multiple time-streams confuse the issue further. The narrative can be slow-moving, especially in the first half of the novel, as the focus shifts regularly to events in other time streams or to characters' reflections and musings regarding their present position. At times the reader feels like they are viewing an elegant, multilayered tapestry of happenstance and at other times, like they are unravelling a ball of yarn.

All of which means that *This Shared Dream* is a novel that calls for patience and trust on the part of the reader. Because Goonan dips in and out of the present time stream it is difficult to get a feel for the characters and to become engaged with the plot. In all likelihood these qualities have been deliberately crafted by the author. The title of the novel alone hints at the dreamlike manner in which events are presented and those familiar with Goonan's love of jazz will see it reflected in the composition of the novel, from the structure of the chapters to the note progressions of the prose. Ultimately, while we might not feel an emphatic link with the characters, we can certainly identify with the nature of their situation because, once drawn in, we become a part of it.

As a rumination on man's place in the world, *This Shared Dream* may be too subtle and layered for some. Goonan leaves it up to the reader to decide what it means for an individual to have the power to create their own reality and the intensely woven narrative soon becomes lost as a philosophical frame of reference, lessening the allegorical impact of the novel. On top of that, the complex hopping from one *when* to the next means it might well be a bit too much work for those in search of a straight romp.

While the themes in the book are universal, tropes like the Kennedy assassination have been covered to death in alternate history and, unfortunately, Goonan has not fully pulled off the difficult task of reinvigorating them and making them relevant to modern readers. Having said that, for those willing to put the work in, *This Shared Dream* is an intensely rich, original and provocative novel that is worth checking out.





## LASER FODDER TONY LEE

THE FIFTH ELEMENT

·  
HEREAFTER

·  
EYEBORGS

·  
THE TWILIGHT ZONE SEASON 2

·  
DETECTIVE DEE

·  
DON'T LOOK NOW

·  
NEVER LET ME GO

·  
TENEBRAE

·  
CAPRICA SEASON 1 VOLUME 2

·  
DRIVE ANGRY

·  
ASSASSIN RISING

·  
THE PACK

·  
ROBOT CHICKEN

·  
THE ADJUSTMENT BUREAU

·  
THE FUNHOUSE

·  
UNKNOWN

·  
ANIME ROUND UP

·  
HORROR ROUND UP



Even for a Luc Besson movie which already possessed bags of visual style, **THE FIFTH ELEMENT** on Blu-ray (6 June) is an especially good-looking feature. Made in 1997, it shows us a little something of what those *Star Wars* prequels could have been with a truly visionary genre artist directing instead of that rather pompously self-indulgent prat Lucas. With its Moebius inspired imagery, pulp sci-fi antics, character humour, and swathes of in-jokes, *Fifth Element* is a 23rd century tale of interstellar adventure, romance between everyman hero Dallas (Bruce Willis, engagingly performing replays of *Die Hard* gunfights aboard an orbital cruise ship) and 'super-being' Leeloo (Milla Jovovich, shortly before attaining genre divinity as the premier sci-fi action heroine), and impending disaster for planet Earth, as cosmic shadows of evil reach down from the dark. It's not a space opera spoof (like Roger Corman's production *Battle Beyond the Stars* or Mel Brooks' *Spaceballs*), but it toys with elements from 2001, *Blade Runner*, *Solaris*, *Alien*, *Metropolis*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Brazil*, *Indiana Jones* plus *Stargate*, *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* while maintaining its own distinctive levels of unique subgenre invention. From the accented English way perfect but seemingly fragile Leeloo repeats "big ba-dah boom" to her kung fu action, and palpable despair at watching a video history archive about 'war', *Fifth Element* is clearly a superstar-making vehicle for Jovovich. Her screen presence as spooky girlfriend par excellence (no wonder director Besson married her!) enhances the miracle-in-progress story developments, such as the ultimate flying car chase. Comedy vies with mystery set-pieces, adorned with Gaultier's fashionable freak show costumes, peopled with such amusing ETs as mondoshowans and mangalores (mondo and manga, natch!), while Chris Tucker's inane squealer Ruby Rhod tries to spoil it but fails. Gary Oldman and Ian Holm bring credibility and high entertainment values to their roles as villainous schemer Zorg and devoutly honourable Cornelius – standout performances which both explain and enliven the bizarre yet uncannily familiar worlds of the movie. And most thankfully, *Fifth Element* is not burdened with earlier casting choices, like Mel Gibson, Julia Roberts, and (argh!) Prince... Just imagine what a terrible disaster that would have been! Driven by the imaginative vitality of a cadre of younger artists and professional designers, rendered and realised by a crew of seasoned veterans (which include special effects creators Nick Allder and Mark Stetson), the assembled talents ensure this sensational film dazzles from its UFO/archaeological start to spectacular world-saving finish. Word of the day: thrilled.



WIN!



Clint Eastwood's **HEREAFTER** (Blu-ray/DVD, 13 June) stars Matt Damon as genuine psychic George, living in social isolation with reluctance to do professional 'readings' and his inexplicable fascination for Dickens. Cécile De France (*Mesrine, Switchblade Romance*) plays French TV journalist Marie whose life is derailed by near-drowning in a Thai tsunami. There's also a London schoolboy traumatised by his twin brother's fatal accident and being separated from his junkie mother. These three plot channels switch regularly, advancing steadily through careful exposition, before they converge at the very end, settling down into happy-ever-after mode (as if that's a metaphor for the afterlife's heavenly bliss?). Long and slow, and without any fascinating portrayals of commendable characters overcoming respective life crises, offering no important/philosophical judgment about individual connections to 'hereafter' spirituality, this is a competently made but mostly uninvolved piece that is rarely elevated above soap opera, and it certainly lacks the searing emotional impact of Mike Hodges' excellent *Black Rainbow* (1989). Unlike the veteran Eastwood's acting swansong *Gran Torino*, or his directorial proficiency on Angelina Jolie's vehicle *Changeling*, this rather staid and flimsy storyline has no dramatic intensity beyond its disaster scenes (including a London terrorist bombing). It passes the time amiably, but in its determination to be blithely realistic and so nothing at all to get excited about, *Hereafter* is really a bit of a Spielbergian yawn overall.

Jumping on a cyber-bandwagon technofear express, clunking low budget echelon-conspiracy thriller **EYEBORGS** (DVD, 20 June), from genre cinematographer turned director Richard Clabaugh, has Homeland Security agent Gunner (Adrian Paul, TV's *Highlander*) uncover a presidential assassination plot. Said threat somehow involves the free range mobile observation units (or "photon-sucking spy-bots") that a future US government has mass produced to 'watch over' the American people, whether the people really wanted sneaky voyeurs and streetwise nanny-cams everywhere or not. Moreover, "what if it's not just a security camera?" The president's nephew gets into all kinds of trouble when he's targeted by a hitman and then, apparently, saved from the killer's bullet by one of the spying machines: the little eyeborg that could? Danny Trejo plays an unfortunate victim of covert surveillance and automated execution. In the end it's up to Gunner, with help from the only 'licensed' journalist (Megan Blake) who's still asking questions in America, to uncover the truth about who, or what, runs the country. *Eyeborgs* might like to be compared to the *Terminator* franchise, as its ODIN system plays a Skynet role, but it's less like Orwell's 'Big Brother', or *Enemy of the State*, and more like Caruso's *Eagle Eye* meets Crichton's *Runaway*. With many little biped watchers (swarming like robot rats), and robot rent-a-cops (giant spiders), and go-kart daleks, it's impossible to take this seriously at all, so it's best appreciated as just silly fun, while cheesy snarling or growling sound effects (for the usually silent mecha-morph stalker-matics, or transformer-bot decepti-pods) will leave viewers no choice in the matter anyway... *Eyeborgs* features acceptable CGI, but it is flappoodle science fiction.



Often working like pattern recognition buffers, active between SF concepts and TV, sci-fi anthology series like **THE TWILIGHT ZONE - SEASON TWO** (Blu-ray, 20 June) sift and sort ideas and twisty plots to find amusing novelty and philosophical profundity in genre material for episodes that might well have inspired movies later on.

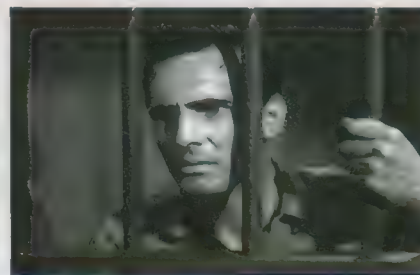
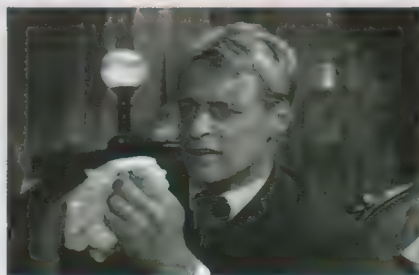
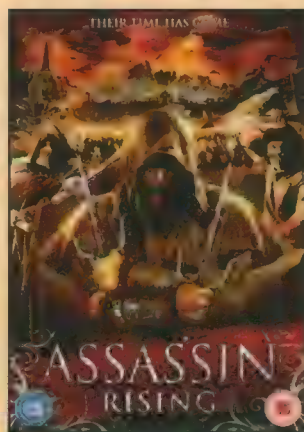
Making changes this season, Rod Serling begins 'on set' asides to deliver intro comments and narration, and there's a keener sense that Serling usually saves all the best one-liners for himself, so aesthetically he's positioned at the programme's engine heart - despite his blatant chain-smoking and (regrettably unfortunate!) cigarette ad endorsements.

The stories here present people in conflict with modernity or fate, or with themselves. Many protagonists win return tickets for their journeys into twilight zones, but a few are not so lucky. Sometimes it's a lesson in humility, occasionally it's a well-deserved comeuppance for crime or sin or inhumanity or stupidity or perhaps hubris.

*Nervous Man in a Four Dollar Room* is a stark morality play where a criminal argues with his alter ego (conscience) in a mirror, a plot that anticipates Harlan Ellison's *Shatterday*.

*A Thing About Machines* sees a hateful reclusive sophisticate, who's terrorised by





his own domestic technology, succumb to a bad case of theatrical delirium, and then he's chased by his own driverless car, perhaps inspiring the 1970s' subgenre of homicidal vehicle movies.

*The Howling Man*, imprisoned by monks of truth, reveals a haunting dilemma that predates John Carpenter's *Prince of Darkness*.

*Eye of the Beholder* is notable for being a hospital drama about bandaged beauty and social normality told without any faces visible – until its closing scenes.

Three years before his *Nightmare at 20,000 Feet*, William Shatner stars in *Nick of Time* as a superstitious newlywed risking misfortune by challenging predictions of a 'mystic seer' slot-machine.

Jack Smight's *The Lateness of the Hour* has an inventor's daughter rejecting the daily grind of programmed routines served by a domestic staff of indestructible robots but there's a droid twist, of course, for the retired couple's perfectly manufactured family home.

*A Most Unusual Camera* takes instant photos of the near future, but a trio of crooks ("who can run a four-minute mile, so long as they're chasing a fast buck") waste it on 'predicting' horse race results.

Potomac chat about changing history by time travel soon dissolves a century *Back There* into a chance to prevent Lincoln's assassination.

Agnes Moorehead (whose film career began with *Citizen Kane*) stars in siege ordeal *The Invaders*, in which tiny 'robotic aliens' land their flying saucer on the roof of her farmhouse, and this space oddity appears to have influenced Matthew Robbins' 1987 movie *Batteries Not Included*, and may even have inspired TV's *Land of the Giants*.

Dick York (TV series *Bewitched*) becomes telepathic in comedy of errors *A Penny For Your Thoughts* (which includes a familiar non-PC 'blonde' joke), with a happy ending to rival *It's a Wonderful Life*.

A neurotic patient suffering recurring nightmares about the morgue, in *Twenty Two*, is not reassured by her doctor (Jonathan Harris, *Lost in Space* TV series), and this ghost story/cryptic premonition borrows from the 'hearse driver sequence' in classic anthology *Dead of Night* (1945).

*Odyssey of Flight 33* has a Boeing 707 transatlantic airliner breaking the sound barrier, causing a timewarp to a Jurassic Manhattan. Authentic cockpit dialogue grounds the fantastic in reality, but the plane's return home is only to World's Fair NYC, 1939...

One of life's punch-bags, *Mr Dingle, The Strong* sees Burgess Meredith gifted with super-powers from an alien experiment, which results in much farcical silliness in marked contrast to the tragedy of *Time Enough At Last* and season closer *The*

*Obsolete Man*, which sees Meredith as librarian Wordsworth, sentenced to death in a secular, yet tyrannical, dystopia where a hectoring 'judge' denounces the 'narcotic of literature'.

Before that ultimate downer, Buddy Ebsen (TV's *Barnaby Jones*) demos telekinesis for his casino gambling pal in *Prime Mover*.

Cliff Robertson does a fine job of portraying future shock as the wagon train pioneer walking, from mid-19th century to 1960s' New Mexico, just *A Hundred Yards Over the Rim*.

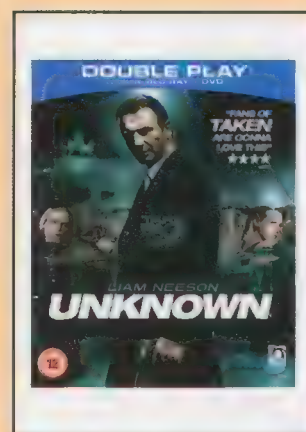
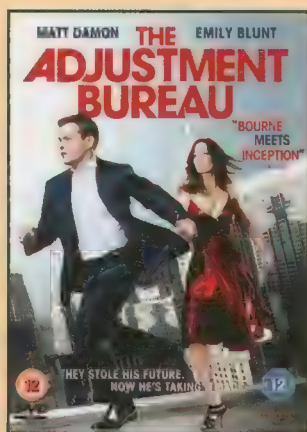
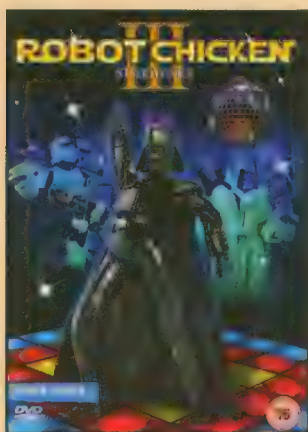
In *Shadow Play*, Dennis Weaver portrays the condemned man dreaming repeatedly that reality depends upon his own continued existence... It's one of Charles Beaumont's most incisive and broodingly philosophical chillers.

*The Mind and the Matter* of a misanthrope's wishful thinking replays (loosely) H.G. Wells' *The Man Who Could Work Miracles*. Now, concentrate... as perhaps it's also an influence on Le Guin's *Lathe of Heaven*.

*Will The Real Martian Please Stand Up?* is a kind of jokey 'whodunit' with a UFO twist, but (no spoiler!) crazy Jack Elam is not the alien.

This definitive HD edition offers pristine quality sight and sound, except for episodes shot on video, which are obviously quite inferior.





Innovative genre filmmaker Tsui Hark returns to directing duties for Chinese action fantasy **DETECTIVE DEE AND THE MYSTERY OF THE PHANTOM FLAME** (DVD/Blu-ray, 27 June). During the Tang dynasty exiled traitor Dee (Andy Lau, *Future X-Cops*, *House of Flying Daggers*) is granted a pardon to investigate murders committed via spontaneous combustion. Dee must solve this case before the coronation of Empress Wu,

but the odds are clearly stacked against our hero as he must contend with palace intrigues, and thwart a treacherous military coup against the first woman on China's throne. The character of Dee is (reportedly) inspired by Chinese folk hero Di Renjie, subject of a series of postwar novels by Robert Van Gulik – who called his detective 'Judge Dee' – and these crime stories were previously adapted for Chinese TV series. For this movie, the director makes Dee a fantastic martial artist instead of the usual portly sleuth. Confronting apparent feats of black magic, to be exposed by scientific inquiry as psychological trickery, Dee must see through all the various parlour tricks (ventriloquism, puppeteering) and mythical illusions (transfiguration, poisonous fire beetles),

but there isn't a logical explanation for everything here, and some powers – which enable superhuman kung fu abilities or seeming witchcraft – defy rationality, blurring the genre focus. Unlike other Asian crime solvers, such as peerless intuitions of modern day Hong Kong's *Mad Detective* or primitive Korean forensics of *Blood Rain*, this is more like *Indiana Jones* meets Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes*. Intrepid champion and 'perfect person' Dee possesses insight and cunning, intellect and humour, but it's the marvellously rhythmic set-pieces, with masterly dynamic fight choreography by Sammo Hung, combining epic action and vivid CGI spectacle, which ensure this big picture deserves attention on DVD racks now crowded with so many Asian blockbusters.



Based upon a short story by Daphne du Maurier, **DON'T LOOK NOW** (Special Edition Blu-ray, 27 June) was made in 1973 by Nicolas Roeg, and it boasts ideal transatlantic casting of Julie Christie and Donald Sutherland as middle-class pair Laura and John Baxter, who abandon a Hertfordshire retreat for Italy after the tragedy of their young daughter's accidental drowning. John oversees the restoration of an old church while, by chance, Laura meets blind biddy Heather (Hilary Mason), who claims to have gifts of second sight – a paranormal ability

shared, albeit in denial of his premonitions, by rationalist John. "Nothing is what it seems" yet here are boldly impressionistic views of loss and love (improvised explicit sex that's often praised for its honesty, as Roeg's careful editing expressed intimacy but avoided any pornographic 'humping' to bother mainstream censors), matched by polished layers of witty black comedy and plenty of chilling horrors. It's the first movie scored by composer Pino Donaggio, and its hi-def presentation is superb, heightening Roeg's brilliantly inventive use of slow-motion for filming all the 'accident' scenes. *Don't Look Now* is one of the very few pictures which improves dramatically upon repeated viewing, as appreciation for its many subtleties (a book titled *Beyond the Fragile Geometry of Space*) and humorous asides grows after recognition of what is most significant. In particular, the abundance of religious imagery here amounts to very little – in modest

schemes of human life and death. (As Mark Sanderson's BFI Modern Classics chapbook notes, quite astutely, "powerless to prevent evil, the Church is reduced to just another system of ritualised superstition.") Venice itself is a prominent character, as a grey wintry 'ghost town' of cold alleys and lifeless waterways. It's hardly a surprise when police haul a woman's corpse from the canal... What else could possibly be down there in the dead pools but murder victims? A red-cloaked killer dwarf prompts the magnificent finale's montage/vortex of action replays, falling and bleeding – through all the cruel jokes of unsympathetic reality and surreal madness of living through bereavement. See this, once again, for its fractured chronicle of melancholy...then you can die laughing.

Courtesy of Optimum we have 3 Blu-rays to give away. Use **DON'T LOOK NOW** as your subject line.





Mark Romanek is not what you'd call a prolific filmmaker... He made the rarely seen and quite bizarre extended rock video *Infected: The Movie* (1986) for Matt Johnson's band The The, promptly followed by cult mystery flick *Static* (1986), but then drifted away into TV documentaries and pop promos, until his comeback feature

chiller *One Hour Photo* (2002). **NEVER LET ME GO** (Blu-ray/DVD, 27 June) is another arresting example of Romanek's eclectic vision as director. From a 1950s timewarp orphanage/boarding school to a 1960s' cottage industry commune, innocent youngsters in prep for short life spans as organ donors discover the horrible truth about their ultimate fates. Its 'brave retro world' is like a quaintly Wyndham-ville version of Michael Bay's *The Island*, sans techno-fetish wares and copter chases, of course, but its cross-genre premise does not feature a more laudable science fictional integrity either. Kathy and Tommy's romantic attempts to avoid giving up their futures, without actually running away from anything or

anywhere, means their predetermined purpose of 'completion' is heroic only as a curio fable of clinging to youthful dreams. After several decades of SF literature and dozens of movies, this peculiarly nostalgic alternative history is just about tolerable as genre drama if logic is disengaged from emotional response. *Never Let Me Go* hardly bothers with much discussion of ethical implications of lower-caste slavery, avoids biotech displays, and sticks to a basic formula of tragic love framed by downbeat rural scenery. Yes, it's true romance (verified by art!) but doomed anyway, and with nothing except for especially sad out-of-season British seaside backdrops to soften a philosophically depressing finale.

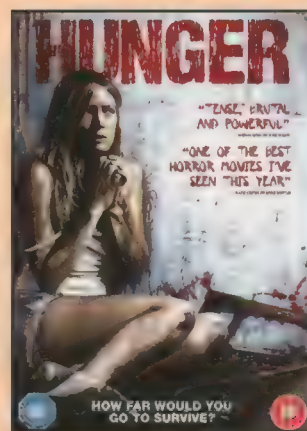
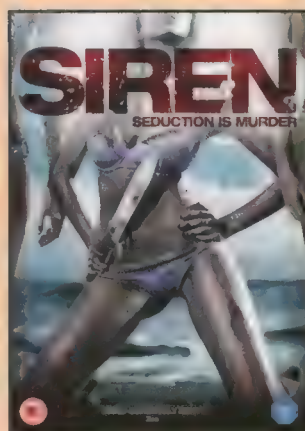
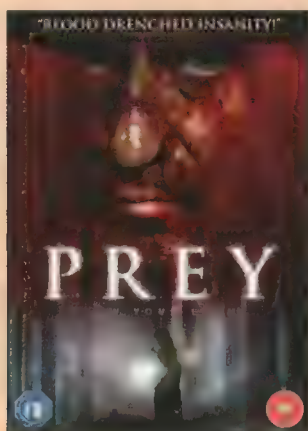


As it was the follow-up to his magnificent *Inferno* (1980), Dario Argento's **TENEBRAE** (Blu-ray/DVD, 27 June) was at first mistaken for being the final part in supernatural 'Three Mothers' trilogy begun with *Suspiria* (1977). That set was not completed until *Mother Of Tears* in 2007, and *Tenebrae* marked Argento's return to a giallo formula, with

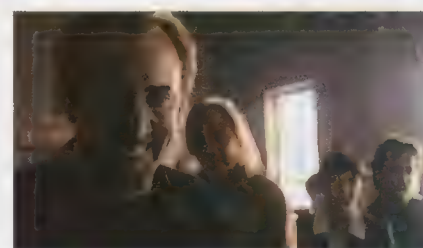
an even more fetishistic treatment for this subgenre thriller than any filmmaker had attempted before. It begins with a book (which shares the film's title) burning on a log fire. In Rome, American novelist Peter Neal (Anthony Franciosa) is disturbed by slayings inspired by his fiction. A sexy shoplifter is brutally murdered at home. Pages from Neal's novel *Tenebrae* are stuffed in her mouth. Lesbian journalist Tilde is also killed, after a roving voyeuristic camera (in a celebrated and influential Louma crane sequence) provides ultimate peeping tom POV, peering in every window of her home. John Saxon (very protective of his new hat) essays comic relief as Neal's chatty agent, while Daria Nicolodi plays the author's secretary, and Neal's fiancée quickly becomes prime suspect in the ongoing slasher case as axe-attacks and knifings accumulate... Pouty or voluptuous Italian starlets abound, as do posturing macho studs. A golf ball courier typewriter, not to

mention 1980s pastel fashions, dates this material notably. A snarling Doberman guard dog attacks one hapless teenage girl and, while trying to escape from this Baskervillesque hell hound, she stumbles into the killer's darkroom lair – blatantly, the killer's own photo 'souvenirs' are used in publicity for this movie! But that's all part of Argento's artistic intent. This is his playful reaction to vitriolic or intransigent critics who labelled him a misogynist. There is sadistic menace found at each turn, danger skulking around every corner and if nothing else *Tenebrae* benefits from its multi-twist ending; still electrifying, partly because the only surviving female is so good at hysterical screaming. *Tenebrae* gets a stunning HD transfer, where every detail, from glinting blades (held in black-gloved hands of course) to those shiny red shoes, is enhanced from its source so that even those polished surfaces do not conceal textures: solid evidence of a perfectly remastered image.



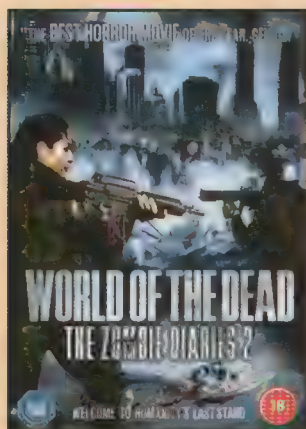


Set fifty years before *BSG* remake's cosmic war broke out, Syfy channel's original series *Caprica* (Interzone #227 has my review of the pilot movie) continues to exhibit those crushingly boring soap opera tendencies which previously turned the once promising *BSG* space opera into something ultimately unexciting and ludicrously trite. To recap, *Caprica* 1.0 sees its zodiacal/colonial set-up, with zealots worshipping a pantheon of false gods ("Go team!"), hit by a brainwashed-teen suicide-bomber of religious terror sect in praise of their mono-bloc god. **CAPRICA SEASON ONE, VOLUME TWO** (DVD, 4 July) brings more rage against polytheistic complacency, as shifting political and criminal/corporate loyalties enable homicidal treachery, enslavement and retribution. There is geek love and hate in virtuality, and Greek tragedy in the ostensibly real world where marital/familial problems, and lingering paternal grief over failures to raise/protect daughters in a cruelly volatile technocracy, underscore many twisty plot threads just for the sake of wooing more non-genre-literate viewers of mainstream TV. Planetary societies maintain obsolete tribal cultures steeped in traditions viciously at odds with modernity. Its crucial error in terms of authentic science fiction in the 21st century is that *Caprica* presents an ideologically violent, completely irrational conflict between two different faiths (reflecting on real world anxieties about fundamentalist Muslims versus right wing Christians), instead of the proper SF concern of atheism confronting any fantasy beliefs in a scenario of ethical progress towards secular democracy for an interplanetary future-history. For a story about birth pangs of AI and the apocalyptic fall of 'mankind' (vaguely mirroring ancient Rome), *Caprica* stumbles along without surprises or significant impact, lacking metaphorical/philosophical nuances beyond deliberate confusions of reality/VR, in this narrative where cyberspace and actuality are converging slowly, one world collapsing into otherness ('building temples' in dirt and sky) and punching far below its weight. Instead of imaginative SF overcoming all the odds against prosperity on the road to utopia (dream/process, not a destination) here's yet another cautionary tale of a ghost-in-the-machine prospectors' future that doesn't work; a weak inter-world milieu where the failure of civilisation is inevitable. How depressing... again! Its CGI is usually flawless and winningly stylised (especially amusingly lawless retro-noir cityscape of killer-game zone New Cap City), but there's very little direct correlation between CGI cityscapes and stage-set interiors. So, apart from a few high-rise balcony panoramas or street corner walkabouts, *Caprica*'s visual effects give viewers hardly any convincing impression that central characters like the Graystones actually work amongst those gleaming rainbow designer towers or live in art deco housing blocks. *RoboCop* (which benefitted from Dallas as locale 'character') it isn't! Whereas *Wild Palms* made a virtue of its soap and sci-fi mix, *Caprica*, like so much so-called 'genre' TV, is compromised and wholly deficient in rational or artistic integrity as canon material, embracing its budgetary limitations for whatever 'works' (Vancouver's Skytrain stands in for a mag-lev transport) or looks cool (whoa, kick-ass babes fighting in the death-free cyber-arena!), when it should be challenging or at least satirising the blandness of such tiredly overly familiar conventions. As sci-fi, *Caprica* has all the calories but none of the flavour. Like the unique Cylon prototype shooting a family dog, it is just firing blanks. It's quite watchable as glossy skiffy telly and yet it's all too frequently dull or unsatisfactory on a regular basis to recommend, even halfheartedly, never mind wholeheartedly. As alternative weird intriguer with quirky appeal, Alan Rudolph's charming oddity *Trouble in Mind* (1985) is preferable to this.



"Even in hell, there is compassion." Nicolas Cage's latest cinematic mission of violent redemption is **DRIVE ANGRY** (DVD/Blu-ray, 4 July), a standard crowd-pleaser with a daffy of influences – including *Ghost Rider*, *Shoot 'Em Up*, *The Terminator*, and Jack Starrett's 1975 road movie *Race with the Devil* (a remake is in the works), plus some Tarantino pretensions. Unkillable/vengeful escapee Milton pursues evil dude Jonah (Billy Burke, *Untraceable*, *Twilight* saga, *Red Riding Hood*), leader of a Satanist cult who have kidnapped a baby (Milton's granddaughter), for a sacrificial finale. Teamed up with Louisiana heroine Piper (Amber Heard, *And Soon the Darkness* remake, *The Ward*), Milton hunts down the baddies and saves the world! Pure comic book content follows spaghetti western stylings, but lacks any surreal artistry that could have made it exceptional (like classic *Hellboy*). Director and cowriter Patrick Lussier (*Dracula 2001* and its sequels, *My Bloody Valentine* remake) seems entirely satisfied with a 3D mentality that cannily evokes a knowingly cheesy grindhouse appeal. He pours it on, like cheap whiskey over tap water ice, but doesn't spill a drop. Hell's man-in-black, the Accountant (William Fichtner, Shaun Cassidy's *Invasion* TV series, blind chap in *Contact*) is actually the pivotal character, enabling Milton's bloody justice. Fichtner's studied performance is cool enough that his über-fixer deserves a spin-off TV show.





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Thailand's first ever time travel/warfare movie, *Siyama* (2008), is released on DVD as **ASSASSIN RISING** (4 July). The lengthy prologue, in 18th century Siam, reluctantly gives way to a present day sequence showing how – as if by magic – a car load of history students are transported back to meet their ancestors.

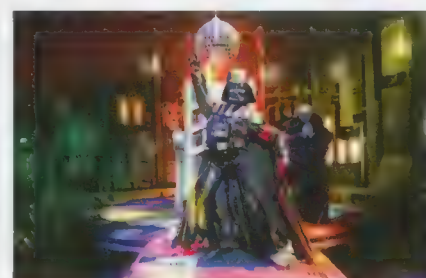
In prep for a fearsome warrior clan to invade the besieged village, the story here is ponderously slow to develop even basic potential. There's a lot of talking to explain plot points, and then more talking to account for middling characterisation. Sombre respect for Thai cultural traditions or religious dogma is so endemic it's farcical. Curiously, so much of what's on screen is erratically stylised, and seemingly influenced by American genre cinema (in this case westerns and sci-fi, most notably *Army of Darkness* and *Back to the Future III*), it appears that, battle re-enactment society playfulness (much familiar guff about noble savages) aside, dramatic authenticity is the first casualty of this 'secret history' movie. Although I've only seen about a dozen Thai films, I get the distinct impression that here's a thriving

national cinema industry growing into the global marketplace, but without many obviously great artistic directors, except for (muay thai) martial arts enthusiast Prachya Pinkaew (*Ong-Bak*, *Warrior King*, *Chocolate*), and of course the Hong Kong born Pang brothers (*The Eye* trilogy, *Bangkok Dangerous*, *Tesseract*). A lack of many distinguished actors does not help much either, and even middle-aged Thai 'character actor' types only seem to be able to play it earnest or more earnest. *Assassin Rising* is further troubled by sloppy pacing. The film seems about twenty minutes too long. Quality of CGI work is very poor, especially when it's used for explosions instead of physical pyrotechnics. Give this a miss, and see *Samurai Commando: Mission 1549* instead, which is a lot more fun.



Lone driver Charlotte picks up a hitchhiker but he disappears during the stopover at a dingy rural saloon. Suspicious, Charlotte breaks into the place after hours, and finds a hidden room, but promptly gets clobbered by cackling pub landlady Spack, who keeps Charlotte a prisoner in cages with another waylaid traveller. Oh, and the hitchhiker is Mrs Spack's errant son. **THE PACK** (aka: *La Meute*), on DVD 4 July, by novice writer-director Franck Richard, is basically a French version of *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, but we have been down a similarly modern gothic road to nowhere before with Xavier Gens' grimly

comical *Frontiers*. Force fed and drained of blood, Charlotte is hung up by one arm and left outside for the night beside a slag heap, awaiting the appearance of mutant ghouls that emerge from the ground every full moon to feed (unlike British shocker *The Descent*, this film's about the nocturnal ascent of grotesque bloodthirsty monsters). Rescued by a former local policeman, Charlotte struggles to escape but (of course!) the formidable Spack isn't dead yet. At a miners' shack, Charlotte and a gang of bikers must face their fate after sundown in an unlikely siege while surrounded and attacked by eyeless 'zombies'. Short on logic but long on ugliness, laden with a bizarre atmosphere and a quasi-surreal intensity, *The Pack* boasts plenty of extreme carnage and its action scenes result in predictably ghastly deaths. Although aiming for a tragic visual poetry, it never bites hard enough.



Take one rubber chicken. Add beer. Tenderise with extreme prejudice. Result: there's a crass disturbance in the force. **ROBOT CHICKEN – STAR WARS EPISODE III** (DVD, 4 July) has action figure stop-motion that's 'animated' by dummy acting. From slacker bowels of toilet humour here's random scenes (TV channel surfing) from the original trilogy reworked as puerile farce. Disco version of Darth Vader succumbs/rises to an "aw, man!" dark side. Death-to-jedis jokes are





"How could a plan just change like that?" says the guardian 'angel' underling. "I don't know," his boss replies. "It's above my pay grade." **THE ADJUSTMENT BUREAU** (DVD/Blu-ray, 11 July) is a nifty sci-fi variation of boy meets girl, boy loses girl...because of New-York-minute meddling by men in hats who can edit reality, leaving not much to chance. But freewill and the modern fairy tale of true love still gets in the way of even the Chairman's big plans for humanity. Writer-director George Nolfi's commercially savvy action thriller propels heroic *Bourne* star Matt Damon (much better here than in *Hereafter*) into a political arena as senate candidate David Norris. He loses a first election but, after falling for dancer Elise (Emily Blunt, *The Wolfman*, *Wild Target*), David rebels, very publicly, against the manufactured style and focus group driven political image-making of his campaign advisors. This presents itself as a metaphor for the intervention and recalibration practiced by those uncanny adjustment agents, who aren't like Sapphire and Steel. The adjusters don't repel intruders and fix what's broken – restoring order to chaos, they oppressively micro-manage cause and effect, keeping everybody in line (the fallacy of a benevolent dictatorship), so it's no wonder a motivated Norris rejects their bureau's interfering ways: "He's got a hat. He's in the substrate." Although even quasi-religious overtones are minimised, genre echoes of *Dark City* (1998), witty *Twilight Zone* episode *A Matter of Minutes* (1986), and, of course, *The Matrix*, are heard albeit faintly as a ticktock accreditation in the cosmic background noise. Meanwhile, in the vast multiverse of authoritarian power plays, chief adjuster Thompson (Terence Stamp) tangles with Fichtner's Accountant from *Drive Angry*. Sorry, I'll get my coat, and hat...

leftover scatological dregs of sci-fi con bar gags. There's nothing wrong with genre spoof humour, but if only TV programme makers would expend as much effort on crafting their own material instead of merely attempting (as in Boba Fett's soporific vengeful fantasies) throwaway parody sketches based on someone else's work wannabe comedy-writers like Seth Green might create something worth watching...and actually funny. Lucas might want to rethink that old saying about imitation being the sincerest form of flattery. There's not even narrative compression here, it's just a pointless jumble of re-starts/jump-cuts/false-endings. Ewok roadkill is the best geek joke done in bad taste. This might be weakly amusing if your party's a flop, or you're falling down drunk. Otherwise, look elsewhere for sci-fi splatter laughs. Try watching *Lexx* again!

Tobe Hooper's freaky 1981 horror **THE FUNHOUSE** (Blu-ray, 18 July), about a group of incautious teenagers spending the night at a carnival, is an uncelebrated – albeit minor – classic, admirable for its unflinching scrutiny of our morbid fascination with grotesques. With the tawdry charm of clearly fake 'horrors' stacked against some truly frightful and loathsome aspects, this guide to the prickly/queasy aesthetics of touring sideshows is more slowly paced than any recent thrill-ride shockers, but its teens-in-jeopardy drama offers an unnervingly precise dissection of macabre attractions while, paradoxically, successfully blurring the dividing line between masquerade and façade, and the actuality of unbearably ghoulish dread. The movie's strobe-lit finale is one of sustained hysteria as the screaming heroine fights off a hideous mutant.



Although not every ID-theft plot should be considered for genre canon, I have always thought loss/theft of identity is a genuinely science fictional concern, rather than just a basis for crime/mystery drama. From *The Prisoner* (either telly version) and Jack Gold's *Who?* (1973), to the *Bourne* franchise and *The Net*, there's plenty of intriguing scope in such scenarios for showing how the uncentred 'self' is stressed or destroyed by compelling external forces. **UNKNOWN** (Blu-ray/DVD, 18 July), directed by Jaume Collet-Serra (*Orphan*, *House of Wax* remake), stars Liam Neeson who's plunged into a mystery on waking from a coma in Berlin. He can't prove who he is, his wife doesn't recognise him, and he's been replaced by an impostor. Struggling with amnesia from a car accident, and apparently delusional, our protagonist flees from hospital after a man tries to kill him. "Sentiment... It's always the first thing to go." There's a biotech summit, an ex-Stasi agent (Bruno Ganz), an illegal Serbian immigrant (Diane Kruger with 'heroine' imprinted through her character like a stick of rock), and if it all seems reminiscent of Polanski's *Frantic*, well that's okay for such cloak 'n' dagger goings-on with Cold War spooks, ensuing assassination plots, and a hotel bombing. Apart from obvious twists (even *Salt* had a bumper file of plot clichés), such as a pre-climax info-dump (flimsy mcguffin/clarifier is lucrative GM corn), *Unknown* suffers from worst curse of many US spy dramas – hackneyed dialogue: "Do it now! Or many people will die!" Unlike super-heroism of *Bourne Identity*, or comedic mayhem of Jackie Chan's *Who Am I?*, *Unknown* aims for a vague sense of espionage realism – despite unlikely spy-fi coincidences. This excellent HD transfer has vivid deep blacks, and pin sharp detailing for action scenes, including fine stunt work in the street havoc of car chases.



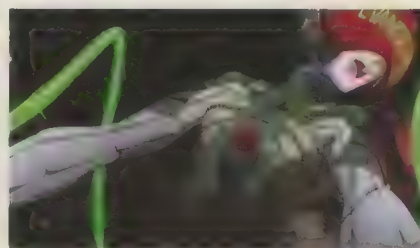
## ANIME NATIONS

It's difficult to keep up with new stuff... Impossible to catch up with old/missed stuff, as the onrushing media juggernaut of Japanese animation continues to overwhelm us with numerous TV shows, movie sequels, and franchise spin-offs. Part of relentlessly churning productivity of endlessly propagated, wholly disposable anime, **Fullmetal Alchemist Brotherhood – Volume Four** (DVD, 13 June) is hard to get into, harder still to care about, without having seen the original *Fullmetal Alchemist* series, never mind any of earlier volumes in this *Brotherhood* spin-off. Alongside sanitised gothic romantic fantasy, **Vampire Knight Guilty – Volume Three** (DVD, 27 June), *FAB* is just time-wasting material attempting to mix philosopher's stones with horror antics and sitcom routines, just as *VKG* switches clumsily between fairy tale and soap opera. **The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya – Season Two** (DVD, 4 July) is twee sitcom whimsy about time travelling (déjà vu is a plot point) schoolchildren in 'SOS brigade' eager (although with sarcastic narration) to make contact with aliens or espers for the busily delightful summer holiday break. The three-disc boxset includes a spin-off batch of parody episodes on a bonus disc. Sci-fi action/farce **Birdy the Mighty – Decode 1** (DVD, 11 July) has a galactic investigator (Barbarella meets Wonder Woman), who is undercover on Earth, fighting alien criminals and monsters until inadvertently killing a human schoolboy. Now she has to adopt his 'spirit' and share her body and life with him, resulting in awkward confusion of teenage sitcom and superhero antics. **Naruto Shippûden – Volume Six** (DVD, 11 July) offers more ninja school comedy-action in a low-tech drab fantasy universe where supernatural powers are used to combat threats like 're-animation jitsu'. Apparently a TV spin-off connected to the milieu of Kazuaki Kiriya's stylish live-action movie *Casshern* (2004), **Casshern Sins – Part Two** (DVD/Blu-ray, 18 July) is about a cyber-hitman in a post-apocalypse realm, which benefits from a painterly style for its backgrounds, and excellent use of colour and shadows to generate atmosphere. **Xam'd: Lost Memories – Collection One** (DVD/Blu-ray, 18 July) and **Collection Two** (DVD/Blu-ray, 5 September) is another alt. world scenario/superhero adventure (infected schoolboy transforms into



warrior cyborg) in wartime, featuring some interesting hardware and curious biotech monster designs. However, technically and creatively, most TV anime is nothing to shout about – just basic stuff, competent yet uninspired, and too fond of aping cinematic techniques of close-ups and standard movie editing. (Hey, guys! When only the camera is moving, that is not animation!) Here's a sampling of other, decidedly more interesting, recent releases...

The first spin-off from a Japanese TV comedy-action series (which I have not seen), anime feature **EDEN OF THE EAST – THE MOVIE I: KING OF EDEN** (Blu-ray/DVD, 6 June) is a satirical sci-fi sitcom aftermath of whoops apocalypse mysteriously averted. Americans (redneck jingoism?) seem to despise the French, but Hollywood was quite happy to appropriate 'noblesse oblige' for *Spider-Man*'s ideological motto "with great power comes great responsibility." This *Eden of the East* movie, by Kenji Kamiyama (veteran of *Ghost in the Shell* spin-offs, writer of *Blood: The Last Vampire*), features a group of civilian do-gooders equipped with special noblesse phones for networking their individual heroic efforts, although it's not easy to figure out exactly what they're all accepting responsibility for doing. Ditsy girl Saki (an agent stranded in NYC), with an aversion to guns, is looking for people's hero amnesiac 'Air King' Takizawa – who's either the PM's illegitimate son, or a missile terrorist of non-event 'careless Monday'. Villains plot trouble, and they'd get away with it, too... but for all those pesky kids (*Lie To Me*'s Dr Lightman would have a field day reading their OTT micro-expressions). It starts with a plot-summary recap but the ongoing tale remains largely impenetrable in its details/references ("What if #12 is Mr Outside and the Supporter?" uh-huh...?) not to mention throwaway jokes ("be a victim; the strength of a victim" – very droll). There's much here (perhaps too much?) that does not parse easily for the uninitiated, and yet I found little sense that its strangeness and otherness are truly fascinating, as plenty of this material just seems like incidental/



whimsical asides, and the storyline never strays very far from the safety of Asian homilies anyway. It's something like a combo of *Leverage* meets *Alias* plus *Bourne* that's lacking in action, but has a strand of nifty cine-literate scripting laced with occasionally lowbrow humour. *Eden of the East – The Movie II: Paradise Lost* should be released soon.

Here we go again, "transcending the limits of humanity...turning into a nearly divine being." Derived from sprawling manga/anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, written by the franchise's creator Hideaki Anno, **EVANGELION: 2.22 YOU CAN (NOT) ADVANCE** (Blu-ray/DVD, 20 June), is the second movie in this official 'rebuild' series, following on from where *Evangelion: 1.11 You Are (Not) Alone* left off. On the discs, both films offer tweaked/extended versions of their original cinema releases, numbered 1.0 and 2.0 to distinguish them from previous incarnations. *Evangelion 1.11* is essentially one boy's coming-of-age story, against ongoing 'war of the worlds' catastrophe backdrop, for which only children appear to have the right stuff to pilot mega-mecha robots that can defend Earth from invasion crises. Rather disquieting as this set-up is, with boss' young son Shinji growing beyond his limits to become a reluctant hero (no pressure though!), it's more disturbing as sci-fi horror with themes of parental neglect (usually indistinguishable from child abuse), that also has much teenage sexual frivolity. Main protagonist Shinji isn't the only eva cyber-pilot, but he doesn't mix well with the other teen heroes culled from stropky delinquents, angsty nice kids or autistic savant types. Fallen 'angel' aliens are morphing fractal biotech entities wielding apparently cosmic power, turning seas bloody, forcing cities underground to survive. It's a cosmological interpretation of biblical apocalypse, with impressionistic montage as flashbacks, and inscrutable philosophical monologues concerning human instrumentality. Contrasted with some character-based sitcom/perversely voyeuristic rom-com, all the breathless dialogue of cosmic





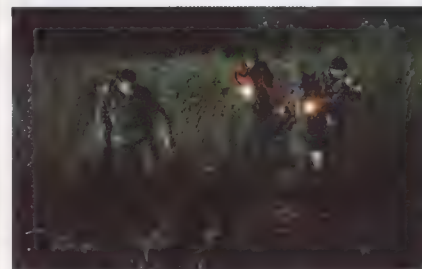
romanticism is quite amusing, especially when the Central Dogma project's destiny is in conflict with god's word (and Vatican treaty?). Experiments on eva tech accidentally produce a lethal angel in giant robot form, resulting in monster/disaster movie complications, quite horrific implications for pilot combatants, and a mess for clean-up crews. A sense of weird tech beyond control is plain throughout. Oversized alien machinery has been ravaging our planet since postwar era of *Kronos* (1957), so *Evangelion* is not offering new concepts. It does, however, sometimes have lengthy sequences that are strikingly imaginative in a poetically visual sense although its action defaults to hectic and plainly silly *Transformers* mode – like a sci-fi cartoon from Michael Bay – with urban mayhem, nuke attacks, and mutations galore. It looks and sounds good at times, but too often details are sketchy so this is only like future-world-building with Lego bricks. While it's never as much fun as 3D photo-real anime *Appleseed* movies, this is, apparently, a faithful remake combining 2D cell-animation with dazzlingly rendered CGI, which certainly meets the filmmakers' aims to be more accessible to genre fans than the original series is to infrequent anime watchers. "The third impact is coming; it's the end of the world!" Watch this space...

In the closing scenes of Tarkovsky's eminently weird but somnambulist *Stalker* (1979), there's a momentary display of psi power that's subtle and eerie with some beckoning potential, but is atypical of SF cinema prone to grandly spectacular demonstrations of super-heroic fantasy. Perhaps the finest sci-fi anime movie, certainly one of the most popular, **AKIRA** (Blu-ray/DVD, 20 June) was made a decade before *Stalker* and is its polar opposite on the vast spectrum of generic diversity. Starting at the point (nuclear blast!) where most SF films end, *Akira* leaps ahead to reveal flaws in a rebuilt society after the bomb. While arty *Stalker* is grindingly meditative drama with a glacial pace, epic *Akira* is packed with exciting action scenes releasing protean horrors.

The point of comparing this animated epic to a live-action film is that *Akira* boasts such highly detailed background artwork and top quality moving pictures from the 1980s that it's easy to forget you are watching 'animation'. For its era, *Akira* was a groundbreaking movie, and the potency of its markedly surreal imagery (including 'hallucinations' of a monstrous teddy bear) remains undiminished in a complex narrative centred upon a military psionic crisis, of power beyond human control, which drives apart friendly rivals Tetsuo and Kaneda in a neo-Tokyo bikers gang. During a desperate coup d'état by 'patriotic' soldiers, the rogue colonel says "You're all puppets of corrupt politicians and capitalists!" – a line of half-truth which neatly sums up the plots and themes of a thousand futuristic thrillers with international appeal. *Akira*'s climactic showdown at an Olympic construction site presents havoc that's measured not in mega-deaths but on the Richter scale. It culminates in a transcendental rebirth for übermensch Akira (with the help of three 'star children'), and in the twinkling of an eye, perhaps, a fresh start for the cosmos too. Hollywood's live-action remake, due in 2013, is an enticing prospect.

Perhaps the first ever documentary biopic feature in anime format, **MUSASHI – THE DREAM OF THE LAST SAMURAI** (DVD/Blu-ray, 4 July) is an oddity of considerable charm directed creatively by Mizuho Nishikubo, from a screenplay by Mamoru Oshii (maker of great sci-fi anime movies *Patlabor*, *Sky Crawlers*, *Ghost in the Shell*, and the live-action surrealist classic *Avalon*). With its cartoonish CGI narrator, an often whimsical professorial character, *Musashi* chronicles the life and times of swordsman Miyamoto Musashi (1584–1645). Exploring Chinese history, and the development of warfare and combat techniques (focusing on horses and weapons), while struggling to discern any truths from legends and folklore about Musashi's various duels or battles, Nishikubo uses live-action backdrops and storytelling 'flashbacks' in b&w animation with splashes of colour. Deploying every trick in the documentarist's handbook – and every other filmmaking guide – such an innovative, decidedly humorous approach to a rather sober topic ensures this quirky piece of Asian 'infotainment' is a captivating, often informative, curiously speculative, usually quite amusing meta-fictional movie.

## DEADWEIGHT HORRORS



As if *Razorback* (Australia) has been rediscovered or perhaps fondly remembered by another generation of genre filmmakers, we have recently seen *Pig Hunt* (USA) and *Chaw* (Korea), and now here's French eco-horror monster movie **PREY** (aka: *Proie*), on DVD, 6 June. Amidst family tensions due to the troubles of their failing pesticides business, menfolk go on a hunting trip after wild boar in the nearby forest. Pig beast kills their dog (a first attack that's mostly off-screen). Men smoke boar out of a hidey hole and kill the creature but it's not alone, and not the only animal affected by toxic waste from the family's chemical factory. Much running about, firing shotguns/rifles into darkness, rarely produces any effective scares. There's significant visceral impact in tackling wildlife in the forest, but far more gore here than seems necessary, making several key scenes comically gratuitous.



How many exorcists does it take to change a light bulb? **THE RITE** (DVD/Blu-ray, 20 June) is directed by Mikael Håfström, maker of *1408* (based on Stephen King's story) and Swedish thriller *Drowning Ghost*. In his first big screen role, Irish TV actor Colin O'Donoghue plays Michael, a sceptical American aboard, in the Vatican for a training course in exorcism rituals – and it's inspired by 'true events', of course! Father Xavier (Ciarán Hinds, *Rome*) sends Michael to visit Welsh Jesuit exorcist Lucas (oh dear, a half whimsical, half malevolent performance by Anthony Hopkins), waffling through practical demos:



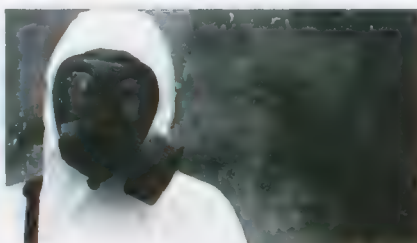
casting out evil spirits from a pregnant girl, challenging some unholy presence haunting a small boy. There are screaming ab-dabs routines, madly writhing contortions, antisocial aggro, and diseased looking make-up effects, etc. Tragic death is predictable, too. Disbeliever Michael soon believes that he's going insane as spooky dramas become increasingly gothic in style, with a frog plague and a red-eyed mule in nightmarish scenes – resulting in the movie's basic plot twist: what happens when the exorcist is possessed? Sadly, *The Rite* offers just a miscellany of typical delusions, half campy hokum and clever fakery instead of serious theological studies or interrogative philosophy. Want the name of the beast? Okay, Ba'al (or banal) it is then...



Shipwrecked crazy guy dies mysteriously on a yacht. Another rescue attempt strands the sailing pals on a remote island. Some castaway problems and overwrought sexual tensions are not helped by wooden acting that never rises above clichés. **SIREN** (DVD, 27 June) mucks about with Greek myth of sirens but does very little with its seductive material. This is the only feature helmed by Andrew Hull, an art director on TV shows like *Queer as Folk*, who died (age 46) after filming was completed in 2009 but before *Siren's* 2010 premiere. Perhaps as a result of that (a botched final cut?), the plot here is confused, its weird incongruities mostly pointless, and it's a laughably incoherent mess. There's lots of aimless running about and shouting, too much emoting and not enough proper action. Tunisian locations add nothing to the production. Flashbacks, hallucinations, and premonitions, are so contrived it soon plays as ridiculous. Is this trying to copycat TV's *Lost*? Is *Siren* cruising in the wake of Chris Graham's superior *The Ferryman*? Certainly, it's not in the same nautical league as Christopher Smith's brilliantly enigmatic *Triangle*. Ignore its beach campfire singing lures.

When directing your first horror feature, do you try something that you consider has an important message to communicate, or just re-use any trashy exploitation formula that undiscerning fans can enjoy?

Do you prefer *Hellraiser* or *The Evil Dead*? Would you pick *Eraserhead* or *Halloween*? Is mondo a better approach to horrors than art-house? Steven Hentges brings the conceits of shockumentary and crucible-of-terror concerns of the *Saw* franchise to **HUNGER** (DVD, 27 June), for which a mixed bunch of people are trapped in an escape-proof dungeon and left there to starve...until they kill each other for food. With its unconvincing 'experimental' scenario, complete with 'mad scientist' diligently watching everything on CCTV, this low-budget production is lacking imagination, plays like witless subgenre imitation, and its only achievement is astounding levels of tedious dialogue and feeble management of its pace for a plotline that stretches on for over a month in the prison hole. As a novice filmmaker, if you're trying for something deeply shocking like *A Serbian Film*, or something depraved like *Deadgirl*, or just something utterly bleak like *Wolf Creek*, that's fine, well, and good. *Hunger* wears its stagey pretensions like a cheap bogeyman mask, and is without any honest scares, creepy atmosphere, or plausibility as drama. If only new horror auteur wannabes would stop behaving like tribute bands and twig that it is composing, not copying, that sounds creative.



"I'll just take a quick look." Last we shall ever see of him, then... Co-directed by Kevin Gates and Michael Bartlett, British clunker **WORLD OF THE DEAD: ZOMBIE DIARIES 2** (DVD, 27 June) is a simplistic by-the-book sequel to *Zombie Diaries* (*Black Static* #8), offering further evidence that bogus documentary camcorder shite (with blatant overuse of night vision) has already exhausted all its creative possibilities and is now just overstaying its welcome in genre territories. Army base overrun by undead while a disorganised evacuation is in progress – when, suddenly, there's a noise from below: "What was that?" asks camera operator. "Stay here," orders the soldier in charge. Ah, but if he stays put, who will video your search downstairs in

the cramped dark cellar? It's a pedestrian gore sequel to a rubbishy no-budget, characterless video flick which couldn't afford to stage any realistic stunts or genuine scares. This doesn't work at all because there's no actual story, just a clutch of random events and violent encounters with either hungry undead or anonymous 'outlaws'. Admittedly, this is a much busier movie, with a far bigger scale than its unambitious predecessor, but lots of stuff going on in daylight or after dark is hardly sufficient detail to constitute genuine plot. Rape is a contentious point, with gratuitous assaults (on a zombie, the civilian heroine, and a female soldier) clearly intended to add grotesque/porno titillation to a pathetically boring premise centred on farmyard executions of survivors. Shock horror! "They're coming." Oh, not yet...I still have more stuff to review!



From the revival of Hammer, **THE RESIDENT** (DVD, 4 July) stars the variable Hilary Swank (*Insomnia* remake, *The Core*, *Million Dollar Baby*, *The Reaping*, *Amelia*) and so far dependable Jeffrey Dean Morgan (*Watchmen*, *The Losers*, *Red Dawn* remake) with a deathbed vigil for Christopher Lee as token Hammerite. Finnish director Antti Jokinen enjoyed a modest career in music videos before landing this plum job, but his feature debut about a doctor targeted by a peeping tom/stalker is just another one of those "she thought she was living alone" suspense thrillers. *The Resident* boasts slick production values, but it's just a reworking of *Hider in the House* (1989), seemingly inspired by Christopher Fowler's 1989 story 'The Master Builder' (eventually filmed as *Through the Eyes of a Killer* TV movie, 1992), although the basic idea strand owes a debt to *Crawlspace* (1986). As in *Sliver* (1993) – adapted by Joe Eszterhas from Ira Levin's novel – this mainstream take on voyeurism attempts to rise above downmarket sleaze. However, a drug-rape ordeal (mostly off-screen) leads inevitably to a violent confrontation with needles, knives, and nail gun action in wholly predictable jumpy-scares during traditional cat 'n' mouse subgenre chases. Rent, don't buy this property.



# MUTANT POPCORN NICK LOWE

GREEN LANTERN

•  
X-MEN: FIRST CLASS

•  
PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: ON  
STRANGER TIDES

•  
PRIEST

•  
ATTACK THE BLOCK



Fifty years ago, two galaxies were colliding; or, rather, were passing through each other. 1961 was the year that Julius Schwartz's reborn DC universe completed its five-year-long silver-age superhero rollout with the reinvented Hawkman and Atom, and the year-old Justice League moved into its own title with the November issue, hitting the racks in the same week as the first issue of *Fantastic Four* marked the onset of Marvel's extraordinary creative counter-charge. And while DC had been building on a solid platform of existing characters (Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Aquaman, and Green Arrow), cautiously augmented by the new Flash in 1956 and Green Lantern three years later, it took Lee, Kirby, and Ditko less than four years to create the entire Marvel A-list of *Fantastic Four* (1961), *Ant-Man*, *Hulk*, *Spider-Man*, *Dr Strange* (all 1962), *Iron Man*, *Thor*, *Nick Fury*, *X-Men* (all from the annus marvellimus of 1963, which also saw the founding of the Avengers and the defrosting of *Captain America*), and *Daredevil* (1964). Few customers of these titles registered at the time that they might be witnessing the most creatively important cultural event of their lifetimes, far less imagined that fifty years on those nascent universes and the stories from those very issues would be the most lucrative intellectual property in film. Yet within a decade, the twin universes had grown into the largest megatextual narrative systems in the history of human culture; within fifteen years, had colonised Hollywood; within fifty, would be the most powerful force in the cinematic galaxy. Half a century on, films are still returning over

and over to that genesis moment, retelling the creation myths of their origin stories each time a new screen superhero bows. It's an unequal contest, with DC stuck in a slow-burning monogamous relationship with Warner's while the promiscuous diaspora of Marvel's properties extends like tentacles of chaos across four studios and six major active franchises with as many again in varying stages of development purgatorio. But DC have Christopher Nolan, David Goyer, and for better or ill Zac Snyder, with the biggest studio of the age behind them, and beyond next year's clash of *Avengers* and *Dark Knight Rises* there's a longer game to be played.

So **GREEN LANTERN** is, for the DC film empire, the big one. If there's any future for the DC/Warner's hookup after the last drop has been squeezed from Nolan's *Knight* and Snyder's *Man of Steel*, it rests with monetising DC's other key properties independently of the Goyer-Nolan creative A-team; and since 2005's *Blackest Night* event, Green Lantern has been the Oa of the DC cosmos in print, where its ancient Guardians keep watch over the central battery that charges their entire universe. Like its hero, the film version is visibly nervous about its mission, aware of the responsibility as well as the power it's charged with, and all too self-conscious about its ability to live up to the role. As the first silver-age DC property to make it to the modern digital screen, with the prospects of several other Justice Leaguers riding on it, it carries the fate of the universe on its ring finger; and while Green Lantern was always so much cooler than anyone else in the DC



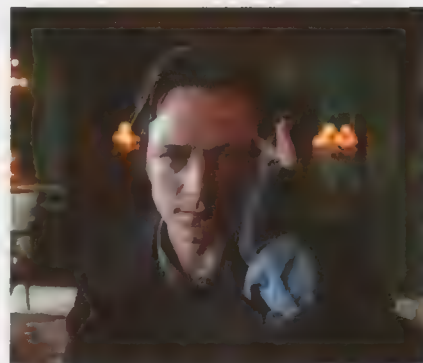
silververse that he constantly threatened to destabilise the whole system, on film he's not a particularly easy sell. His powers have a Looney Tunes quality of casual freewheeling surrealism, knocking missiles out of the sky with giant green boxing gloves or mallets on the materialisation of a whim; while Hal Jordan himself was always a bit of a plank, which hardly figured in the comics because he had an insanely cool job and an even hotter boss whose outward professionalism and distance were periodically displaced into the queen of tightly-costumed space nymphs, but is a bit more of an issue when he's played by a human being.

It is, at least, an impressively fan-friendly undertaking, rolling up fifty years of continuity in a surprisingly sensitive repackaging of the silver Lantern's origin story in the light of more recent Corps lore, and offering yet another solution to the ancient DC geeks' conundrum of what Abin Sur was doing in a spaceship when Lanterns can zip between galaxies in nothing but a suit of green willpower. Stuffed to bursting with all those rubbish names like Parallax and Kilowog, it bowls uncompromising amounts of mythos right from the opening voiceover, where we're thrown into the middle of a Galactus-sized interstellar clusterbomb of infodump that introduces us to Oa and Ryut, the Guardians and the Corps, Abin Sur and Parallax, and the 3600 sectors of the universe, as well as the whole allegoresis of the late-1950s process-colour palette as the spectrum of basic emotions across all sentient species, including actors. DC aren't, yet, trying to build an *Avengers*-style filmic universe of crossovers and teamups – though the presence of Angela Bassett in an otherwise otiose cameo as Amanda Waller, DC's own Nick Fury figure, suggests that the turf is being laid for possible future away games. (A different version of Waller has a central role in David Goyer's *Green Arrow* project set in a prison for supervillains, which is probably too geek-deep in DC universe canon to get made by anyone as pathologically cautious as Warner's, but was still rumoured at one stage to have Matt Damon attached.)

But what really matters most about *Green Lantern* is that it's a kind of sf cinema we hardly ever see, a slice of widescreen space opera on a truly cosmic scale: the first live-action interstellar spectacle since *Avatar*, and the first since *Star Trek* to attempt a cinematic vision of a galaxy-spanning web of advanced

civilisations. *Green Lantern* is Warner/DC's *Thor*, the film that finally opens up the wild cosmic outer reaches of the superhero galaxy. And while *Thor* was able to shelter behind the entirely meretricious pretence of being something more Shakespearean and Sophoclean than just a superhero picture, *Green Lantern* has absolutely no choice but to be a film totally about flying between galaxies in nothing but your digital green birthday suit. Like its star, it's not entirely comfortable with the role. Biplanetary rather than truly intergalactic, the film alternates casually between action on Earth and Oa with the intervening journeys mostly elided altogether. There's a so-so flyover of the Oa cityscape, but the main science-fictional wonder hit comes with a couple of audacious scenes of the massed Lanterns from their 3600 sectors and species, culminating in a *Star Wars*-style massed ceremonial finale witnessed by the representatives of thousands of worlds.

This tension between the cosmic and the personal, which also affected *Thor*, has a readymade actorly rationale in the Manichean struggle of fear and willpower in the Green Lantern mythos, and the human superpower of willing down fear that selects Hal Jordan as Sector 2814's ringmaster. It's made the most of by Ryan Reynolds, who also happens to be the one leading man with a Gil Kane face, albeit also a very unLanternly tendency to puppy-eyed moistness and vulnerability. And while Blake Lively never seemed like a natural choice for Carol Ferris – too young, too blonde, too TV – she more or less pummels acceptance out of you by sheer force of effort, to the point where her heavily-trailed sequel upgrade to the incomparably foxy Star Sapphire becomes the single most compelling attraction of a followup. It's all a bit overfull and underpowered, but its will to do good is stronger than its occasional streak of yellow; and if it seems a little off that there's no Marvel-style creator credit to Schwartz, John Broome, and Gil Kane, it at least marks a particularly dramatic Hollywood feature return for DC universe showrunner Geoff Johns, whose last big-screen credit was as Richard Donner's assistant on *Lethal Weapon 4*, before he rebooted his career into comics to emerge as the architect of the Lantern title's terrifying reinvigoration since the millennium, and is currently celebrating the half-centenary by rebooting the entire DC universe from issue 1. We'll see how that one goes.



The management of comics multiverses is a messy enough business even in their native medium, let alone when it comes to migrating their tens of thousands of recombinant fragments of intellectual property to another form of existence; and if DC have been historically triggerhappy with the reboot button, the Marvel universe on film is a permanent state of infinite crisis. Marvel's main universe is now safely housed in the own-brand studio with Paramount and Disney, but four of its key brands are still trapped in their own pocket universes by deals struck in the nineties that left Spider-Man with Sony and the X-Men, Daredevil, and Fantastic Four with Fox. But the nature of film franchise development means that even these satellite universes vibrate on unstable frequencies; and never more so than in **X-MEN: FIRST CLASS**, a strange misshapen planetoid formed from the detritus of the X-Men system, the characters none of the earlier films wanted and the residue of two different abandoned films.

Here's how these things happen. In 2009 Fox had two X-Men projects at the front of the development queue: a *Wolverine* followup featuring Magneto, under the *X-Men Origins* brand with David Goyer overseeing; and a separate preboot of the main-team franchise featuring a recast teenage lineup, which had been through Zac Penn and three other writers over a two-year period. At that point Bryan Singer came aboard, merged the two projects, and passed the writing duties on to the team of Ashley Miller & Zack Stentz, who also served time on *Thor*, before himself bailing and being replaced by Matthew Vaughn in May 2010. The official credits identify four layers of scripting: Sheldon Turner's storyline from Goyer's abandoned *X-Men Origins: Magneto* in 2005–9; Singer's draft, from late 2009; the brief tour of duty by Miller & Stentz over Christmas 2009/10; and the final team of Vaughn himself with his regular cowriter



Jane Goldman after Vaughn replaced Singer as director in May 2010. Even this much elides everyone who worked on the X-team project in 2007–9 before Singer's reset; while the title has been appropriated from a Marvel miniseries about the actual 1963 lineup, with which this film is completely irreconcilable.

*First Class's* central conceit is to situate the birth of the modern superhero for the first time in its original historical moment, as a product of the politics and the culture of the Kennedy–Kruschev cusp of cold-war cool when technology and sex were colliding or passing through one another. Vaughn's film is an exploration of the world just before and just after the mighty Marvel moment: a world of heroic and villainous superpowers, in which the dominant mythology is technothriller spy fiction, and the idea of the superhero is a mutation born of the atomic irradiation of espionage tropes like codenames, spy planes, and sartorial adventures in plastic. Written and shot at impossible speed, it's a fairly desperate cobble-up, and if a passably adequate superteam has managed to emerge, it's been at the expense of most of what's left of the X-Men universe after three promiscuously greedy ensemble pieces have burned through all the most usable canon and characters. Vaughn famously walked from *Last Stand* because he was only fourteen months from release with the film still in storyboard; this time around, he was less than a year off without so much as a viable script. The result is a thing of shreds and patches stitched together out of a messy tangle of imperfectly carded plotlines from different drafts and indeed entirely different films, populated by a combination of C-list heroes and B-list villains with the only characters old enough in 2001 to be available as recastable young adults in 1962. As in its predecessors, some of the cast are great: Nicholas Hoult's young Beast stands out, and Michael Fassbender will own the world if he can just learn to control his power to suck the Irish accent out of surrounding characters at moments of extreme acting. ("Remember," says Coach X: "the point between rage and serenity.") If the sub-franchise takes off, it raises the fascinating possibility of a geopolitically embedded superhistory spanning the dawn of the silver age to the digital now. But maybe they'll just do the *Deadpool* film instead if its contracted star flops in *Green Lantern*. One's blackest night is the other's brightest day.



Back at current Marvel overlords Disney, the defibrillators are sparking and the dead rising to crew the relaunched vessel on their own top live-action franchise in **PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: ON STRANGER TIDES**, another exercise in refloating a leaking property with a skeleton crew of survivors after most of its original cast have walked the plank. In one respect, at least, *On Stranger Tides* is a small milestone. It's become quite normal practice for studio sequels to buy up and repurpose existing works as vehicles for an established franchise, but usually this happens with spec scripts or just occasionally boilerplate thrillers. But the use here of Tim Powers' benchmark supernatural swashbuckler is the first time anything on this scale has been done with an sf classic, paving the way for such future mashups as *Alvin and the Chipmunks: The Game of Rat and Dragon*. It's about time Powers got some financially binding acknowledgment, as the first three films owe a huge diffuse debt to his particular novelistic cocktail of wooden-world realia, historical pirate lore, and lush romantic undead fantasy. But the actual credit is "Suggested by", and the only directly recognisable debt, beyond the quite magnificent title, is the inclusion in proximity of the public-domain elements of Blackbeard, zombies, and the Fountain of Youth. None of Powers' own characters or plot elements are used, to the film's considerable loss; the scary-mermaid stuff is completely alien, if one of the few strong original elements, and even the vodun ritual has been toned down and Hollywoodised out of recognition so as not to give offence to practising communities.

While it's nice to see a film with Powers' name on it do well, it's hard to see why it has. After three increasingly weird and interesting films which consciously pushed the envelope of blockbuster plotting in speed, complexity, and obliquity, *Tides* is a sad and desperate regression, a collapsing soufflé with hardly any plot at all. The series' generative concept has always been the unstable and shifting web of alliances between a cast of non-cooperant characters whose primary instinct in every situation is betrayal. But *Tides* confines this network of potential betrayals in a limp two-horse race for a prize that nobody particularly cares about, least of all the audience. A striking vindication of structuralist models of plot, it demonstrates the ineluctable difficulty of switching the Proppian roles of hero and helper, even where these have been seemingly overwritten thrice over in the pecking order of screentime, credits order, and percentage points. The reason Jack Sparrow was the star of the first three films was precisely that he *wasn't* the lead, but the character who steals the scenes from the lead. But theft isn't ownership, and while Orlando and Keira might have seemed like spare ship's biscuit after the first film, their continuing presence was absolutely vital to the wiring of the narrative engine. *Tides* tries to rebalance the mechanism by making Jack the lead and the new missionary/mermaid forbidden pairing merely backup, but it never comes close to beginning to think about working. Instead, it gives Geoffrey Rush a wooden leg for extra-coarse pirate acting points. As Keith Richards piratically intones of the last film on this subject, "The Fountain will test you." Indeed it will; this one, not so much.





The season's other graphics adaptation is post-apocalyptic vampire western **PRIEST**, based with rather incontinent looseness on Min-Woo Hyung's exhausting shoot-'em-up manhwa series about a warrior of God battling fallen angels. The film version ditches the whole angel angle, perhaps less in capitulation to middle-American pieties than because the director and star already did all that in the massively more ludicrous and enjoyable *Legion*. Instead, we have a new cast of characters acting out *The Searchers* with tormented celibate Catholic ninja slayers pitted against 3D vampires in a Cursed Earth desert gamescape, where the set pieces include climbing a giant mound of vampire poo and an interminable climactic wirefight on a speeding train full of undead heading for tracks dynamited by Maggie Q as a powerbiking leather nun. This sounds quite fun, but it isn't over nearly soon enough, or indeed at all; though the nesting vampires turn out to have a queen, we never even get to meet her in this instalment, and the last lines are "The war is over." – "No, it's just beginning." With unhappy timing, however, Tokyopop, who publish the comic and whose name is on the film, have just pulled the plug on their US publishing operation, so this promise of a sequel may have to live on silently in the mind of God. Pray now for His mercy, if you know what's truly good for you.



Joe Cornish's homegrown monster pic **ATTACK THE BLOCK** announces its own thematic ambitions by setting its highly localised alien invasion in "Ballard St", Southwark, where the local hoodie gang and a loose network of their victims and victimisers play out some quite edgy, if compromised, issues of class terror and urban alienation in a contemporary English *High-Rise* with monsters. As the story takes us behind the surface of the opening mugging to the characters behind the crime and the lives that made them, an elaborate hierarchy of evil unfolds from the dealers at the top of the pyramid to the child footsoldiers they exploit and criminalise – only for the whole structure to be challenged when the block universe is besieged by dimly lit stuntspeople in gorilla suits with blue light-up teeth. This not being America, only the real villains have guns, so the kids have to fight off the darknesses with an assortment of blades and blunt instruments, allying and bonding with their natural class enemies as a more conventional structure of good and evil asserts itself. There are a lot of bold, or

possibly foolhardy, moves: the acceptance and even endorsement of a culture of casual aggression, petty criminality, and career aspirations limited to the drug-led microeconomy; the *Deathly Hallows* insouciance over the on-screen killing of children; the loading of the dramatic heavy-lifting on a cast of untrained child actors spouting a middle-class white celebrity's idea of street dialogue. I watched it in an inner-London multiplex with a packed house drawn mainly from the local estate, who ate it up and didn't seem to find it noticeably fake or patronising. All the same, it's notable that the sharper edges are bubblewrapped for safety in a cast of cosy white people (Jodie Whittaker, Nick Frost, and Luke Treadaway) who provide the main entry points for sympathy and comic engagement; and that when lives go back to normal at the end all the surviving instigators of criminal acts get bundled into police vans and off to do time, including the 15-year-old lead. As his original victim protests on behalf of the whole block, "he's a hero"; but that still doesn't mean he gets to reboot his universe.



# GARY McMAHON THE HARM

## OUT NOW!



There were three of them then, Tyler, Roarke and Potter, and they were each eight years old: three young boys on the cusp, not yet aware of the darkness that lies at the heart of the world; children more at home with games and fantasy than hard reality. The day that fused these two states – when a nightmare became real life – changed them forever.

But all that happened much earlier, in the Autumn of 1980. This is what came later, long after the fact. Rather than the details of the incident itself, this story constitutes the results of the harm.

"Gary McMahon is the baron of bleak, the godfather of grim...and I mean that in a good way. *The Harm* is a distillation of the essence of true horror. As uncompromisingly confrontational and as arbitrarily vicious as real life can sometimes be, *The Harm* casts a bright light onto the deepest recesses of the human soul and encounters nothing but endless darkness" Mark Morris

"I highly recommend this book. Gary's prose is as rich as ever, evoking atmosphere in every detail, without drifting into excess. Along with the flowing snippets of dialogue, it brings colour to the bleakest of horror landscapes. There are a few surprises, but rather than being a story that relies on shocks, *The Harm* delivers ice-cold realisation. Excellent" Welcome to the Hellforge

"Although starting from an act of excessive violence, *The Harm* will not offer any shocking image, it deals only with the psychological effects, taking the human factor into account. But in the end, those will prove to be more terrifying and with a much stronger effect" Dark Wolf's Fantasy Reviews

"Cold and bleak in content, with characters that are more developed than the brevity should allow, McMahon's *The Harm* is a story that upsets as much as it pleases you to read it. You don't need to read the afterword to know where this story came from – you'll feel it for yourself a few pages in, and shame on anyone who cowers away from finishing it" Ray Cluley

We hope that *The Harm* will be the first of many novellas published by TTA Press, each one priced at just £5 regardless of length. In time, we hope to offer them on subscription, for even bigger savings.

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